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Romantic Rebirth in a Secular Age: Cavell’s Aversive Exertions*

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“For by thy words,” Matthew writes, in a passage Stanley Cavell has taken as an epigraph to part 3 of his The Claim of Reason,1 “thou shalt be justified, and by thy words thou shalt be condemned.” It is possible to hear in this passage the central themes concerning individuality, community, and the meaning of life that have shaped Cavell’s writing throughout his career and that have become even more marked in his recent work. It is by thy words that one will be judged: individuality is something that persons must claim (or refuse) in their expressions if they are to live humanly and well; it is a task involving the achievement of a voice, not a possession. But it is by thy words that one must manage this achievement: genuine individuality can be won only through engagement with our common inheritances, not through separation or detachment, intellectual or otherwise; philosophy, and the individuality it would support, must speak from within our common life and language, not from a place apart. It is further by thy words that one shall be both justified and condemned: there are no perfect exemplars of individuality and humanity; our best achievements—our actions and relations and utterances that are most worthy of justification—will at the same time be marked by self-assertiveness, pride, and rejections of the common that will call for condemnation. Both justification and condemnation will then be forthcoming from the very words that call for them, as both our individuality and our pridefulness will be legible in what we have said and done: by thy words shall one be submitted to judgment.

The task of philosophy, in Cavell’s practice, is to animate the “thy,” to call us out of complacency and inexpressiveness in our ordinary routines and into individuality and humanity. Carrying out this task involves overcoming our attachments to the false necessities of our routines in favor of the deeper necessity that our humanity express itself. Cavell’s views of the ordinary and of philosophy “respond to the fantastic in what human beings will accustom themselves to, call this the surrealism of the habitual—as if to be human is forever to be prey to turning your corner of the human race, hence perhaps all of it, into some new species of the genus of humanity, for the better or for the worst. I might describe my philo-

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sophical task as one of outlining the necessity, and the lack of necessity, in the sense of the human as inherently strange, say unstable, its quotidian as forever fantastic” (p. 154). Here our humanity as it is expressed in ordinary practice is both the occasioning object of philosophy, when that expression is partial or blocked or distorted, and the aim of philosophy, which seeks humanity’s fuller or more adequate expression. The dominant image in Cavell’s writing of the refiguring or realigning of the interrelations of our nature and our practice is that of rebirth. “The rhetoric of humanity as a form of life, or a level of life, standing in need of something like transfiguration—some radical change, but as it were from inside, not by anything; some say in another birth, symbolizing a different order of natural reactions—is typical of a line of apparently contradictory sensibilities, ones that may appear as radically innovative (in action or in feeling) or radically conservative: Luther was such a sensibility; so were Rousseau and Thoreau.”2 And Cavell is himself such a sensibility. His writing increasingly has the ring of prophecy, as he casts the necessity of a sense of the strangeness of the human and of the uncanniness of its given routines as a form of awareness of genuine possibilities of rebirth, while the lack of this necessity is cast as a form of cowardice or of repression. To refuse this necessity is to bedim or betray one’s humanity by failing to realize that it has no proper resting place in practice as it either stands or might stand. It is hence no accident that Cavell has recently insisted on distinguishing what he does from what ordinarily and naturally goes in a university, which “is set up to be exactly what the sciences require, say the organized advancement and transmission of knowledge.” Philosophy, the continuing effort to reanimate the human against the grain of practice as it momentarily stands, “raises questions which may be out of order in a classroom so conceived.”3 It involves taking seriously midnight thoughts about alienation, meaningfulness, distance, and attunement that do not admit of domestication into a guiding and teachable doctrine of life, which at best could only hold in place a new form of practice with its own inhibitions of expressiveness. The activity of envisioning and articulating possibilities of rebirth into greater expressiveness admits of no resting place.

Yet, for all that Cavell’s philosophical writing takes its departure from the criticism of practice as it stands, there is no effort to leave daily practice behind, to achieve transcendence of the ordinary, or to live in a realm of the intellect or the divine. Cavell now regularly praises “Emerson and

2 Stanley Cavell, This New Yet Unapproachable America (Albuquerque, N.M.: Living Batch, 1989), p. 44. It is instructive to note the persistent appearance in Cavell’s writing of lists of sensibilities heroically reactive against the deadened conventions of their ages. See, e.g., the similar lists in The Claim of Reason (pp. 109, 121, 125) and in In Quest of the Ordinary (p. 9).

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Thoreau in their devotion to the thing they call the common, the familiar, the near, the low” (p. 4). Whatever transfigurations and rebirths there are to be are to have more the nature of revisionings of ourselves in relation to our practices than either of revolutions or escapes or of reforms that leave our conceptions of our interests untouched.4 There is no special domain, there are no third entities outside our common life, from which philosophy might begin and to which it might lead us: forms, substances, atoms, and logic are all impotent to play these roles. Nor is there any special class of persons, distinguished by their cleverness or learning, properly to be called philosophers. Cavell has learned from J. L. Austin’s patient interrogations and elucidations of ordinary usage and from Wittgenstein’s concern to keep language from going on philosophical holiday to contest the Platonic conceit that “there is, or ought to be . . . a special class of persons to be called philosophers, who possess and are elevated by a special class or degree of knowledge” (p. 161).

Here we can see in Cavell the rejection of scientism and of claims to expertise in philosophy that are typical of Rorty, Lyotard, and other recent postmodernist writers much influenced by Wittgenstein and Dewey but without the Humean domestications of our critical ambitions that are distinctive of these postmodernist figures. Though philosophy cannot escape the ordinary or criticize it from without, neither is it to be reduced to mere relaxed chat or to appreciative exchanges of a thousand points of view, no one of which can engage our passions fully. The difference here is that, for Cavell, unlike Rorty and other postmodernist, pragmatist, domesticating sensibilities, the ordinary is itself fantastic, uncanny, or divided against itself, filled with both expressions and repressions of independence and solidarity, ambition and resignation, hope and despair. Hence Cavell’s recent interest in Poe’s flat, prosaic, naturalistic registerings of protagonists’ experiences of the extraordinary doubleness of ordinary things, as in “The Black Cat”:

For the most wild, yet almost homely narrative which I am about the pen, I neither expect nor solicit belief. Mad indeed would I be to expect it, in a case where my very senses reject their own evidence. Yet, mad am I not—and very surely I do not dream. But to-morrow I die, and today I would unburden my soul. My immediate purpose is to place before the world, plainly, succinctly, and without comment, a series of mere household events. In their consequences, these events have terrified—have tortured—have destroyed me. Yet I will not attempt to expound them. [Cited in Cavell, p. 122]

Juxtaposed with the opening paragraphs of Descartes’s Meditations, this passage works “to bring out at once Poe’s brilliance (and what is more, his

4 See Cavell, This New Yet Unapproachable America, p. 44.
argumentative soundness) and Descartes’s creepy, perverse calm (given the subjects his light of reason rakes across), his air of a mad diarist” (p. 122). The juxtaposition illustrates, that is, the thought that “the uncanny vision [is] essential to philosophy—to the extent that philosophy is what attacks false necessities and false ideas of the necessary” (p. 184) and the further thought that the ordinary itself provides the resources and occasions for this vision.

This emphasis on the uncanniness of the ordinary as the continuing inspiration of philosophy is a considerable surpassing and deepening of Cavell’s earlier work on skepticism in philosophy. (The essay “The Uncanniness of the Ordinary” [pp. 153–78] is the finest overview of his concerns that Cavell has produced to date.) “Skepticism” now emerges as the name within philosophy for the nearly primordial experience of the uncanny or perhaps of what the uncanny itself names: the way in which our ordinary practices, no matter what their shape, variously but inevitably support and inhibit our humanity and expressiveness. Modern philosophical skepticism captures or expresses this uncanniness. “For me the uncanniness of the ordinary is epitomized by the possibility or the threat of what philosophy has called skepticism, understood . . . as the capacity, even desire, of ordinary language to repudiate itself” (p. 154). Hence modern, post-Cartesian philosophical skepticism is neither the misbegotten and surpassable intellectual by-product of modern science that Rorty takes it to be nor quite a self-subsisting intellectual problem that is to be met with a solution or a demonstration of our knowledge. Rather “modern skepticism [is] philosophy’s expression or interpretation of the thing known to literature (among other places) in melodrama and in tragedy . . . : roughly, the dependence of the human self on society for its definition, but at the same time its transcendence of that definition, its infinite insecurity in maintaining its existence” (p. 174).5 This dependence and transcendence are continually there to be experienced, and such experiences must be continually worked through in the work of writing, not repressed or dismissed, as we live out our humanity.

The continuing, ineliminable presence of these conditions as occasioning circumstances of both philosophy in general and Cavell’s writing in particular accounts for what might be called the characteristic Romantic aversiveness of Cavell’s writing: its refusal to settle on a formula or doctrine of practical wisdom or of human nature as well as its continual rebukes to both our sensibilities, perhaps deadened as they stand, and

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Cavell’s own sensibility, threatened with decay or atrophy. This aversiveness—to doctrine, to us, and to itself—lends to Cavell’s writing a combination of apocalyptic audacity, as we are criticized where we are, and strangeness, as we remain uncertain about where to go.6 Aversive Romantic writing attempts to mark out a continuing path of experience and life between existentialist anxiety, with its halting collapses, and sober, scientific metaphysics, with its inhuman sureties and consecrations of particular forms of practice. This writing seeks not accumulation, not bits of knowledge, not information, but onwardness, rebirth, awakening. Compare Wordsworth—“. . . Paradise, and groves / Elysian, Fortunate Fields—like those of old / Sought in the Atlantic Main—why should they be / A history only of departed things, Or a mere fiction of what never was? . . . and by words / Which speak of nothing more than what we are, / Would I arouse the sensual from their sleep / Of Death, and win the vacant and the vain / To noble raptures . . .”—with Cavell:

It is [my] history of devotion to the discovery of false necessity that brought me to the ambiguity of the title I give to these lectures, In Quest of the Ordinary; to the sense that the ordinary is subject at once to autopsy and to augury, facing at once its end and its anticipation. The everyday is ordinary because, after all, it is our habit, or habitat; but since that very inhabitation is from time to time perceptible to us—we who have constructed it—as extraordinary, we conceive that some place elsewhere, or this place otherwise constructed, must be what is ordinary to us, must be what romantics—of course including both E. T. and Nicholas Nickelby’s alter ego Smike—call “home.” . . . Romantics are brave in noting the possibility of life-in-death and of what you might call death-in-life. My favorite Romantics are the ones (I think the bravest ones) who do not attempt to escape these conditions by taking revenge on existence. But this means willing to continue to be born, to be natal, hence mortal. [Pp. 9, 143]

In In Quest of the Ordinary Cavell himself has become further aware of how his writing, and its ambitions run alongside the writings and ambitions of central figures in the history of Romanticism. The projects of Wordsworth, in the “Preface” to Lyrical Ballads (p. 6), Coleridge, in both “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner” and Biographia Literaria (pp. 56, 57),


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Emerson, in various essays, chiefly “Experience,” “Self-Reliance,” and “The American Scholar” (pp. 35, 106, 108), Thoreau, in Walden (pp. 171–72, 183), and Poe, in “The Black Cat” and “The Imp of the Perverse” (p. 141), are all described in terms that echo Cavell’s characterizations of his own project: making the ordinary interesting, or succumbing to the temptation to surpass the conventional and exemplifying the difficulty of the return, or making us upright and unapologetic, or “the finding of ecstasy in the knowledge of loss” (p. 171), or raising “the question as to the existence of myself, or creation of myself” (p. 141). This writing seeks always “not a state of being, but a moment of change, say of becoming” (p. 111).

The aversiveness and the seeking of becoming in Cavell’s writing both mark a central difference between it and deconstruction, which likewise but differently casts traditional philosophical texts as writerly effects of particular experiences. For Cavell, unlike deconstruction, such relation to traditional philosophical texts as there can and ought to be is not that of dismissal and not an effect of theory. Deconstruction seems still too somber and metaphysical, too obsessed with a governing metaphysics of writing and of philosophy, than does Cavell’s concern with particular texts. Cavell himself notes this difference (p. 132). It is perhaps an inheritance on the part of deconstruction from Heidegger, who also, despite all his centrality in Cavell’s thought, strikes Cavell as soberly metaphysical and as claiming his own exemption from what he would criticize (p. 159). Where deconstruction emphasizes the origin of philosophy in will to power and its ultimate failure, Cavell emphasizes its origin in the primordial midnight (or midafternoon) experience of the uncanny, and he focuses on particular scenes in texts of partial instruction in, transmission of, reaction to, and rebirth in culture, rather than on the failure of philosophy (p. 131). (These are matters of tone and of Cavell’s Americaness that are central to placing his project but hard to argue apart from a feel for the textures of what Cavell and Derrida, and his epigones, are variously up to.)

The continuing aversiveness of Cavell’s writing, of philosophy itself as Cavell sees it, immediately raises the question of what kind of return or recovery from the experience of the uncanny and from philosophy is possible. There is clearly no going back to the experience of the world one might imagine oneself to have had before the experience of the uncanny, no return to an undisturbed consciousness. One will continue to experience the world as uncanny, continue to be aware of one’s simultaneous dependence on and transcendence of others, for the uncanny itself names the experience of the return of familiarity, where awareness of the return continues to mark the world that is returned. “The return of what we accept as the world will then present itself as a return of the familiar,
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which is to say, exactly under the concept of what Freud names the uncanny” (p. 166). One will not be able to master the world metaphysically and to navigate one’s way in it through reliance on the sureties of a theory of what is presented to us in objects or in others. At best to be returned from the crippling and alienating experience of the uncanny and to a rebirth in a world of continuing uncanniness will involve coming to be able to “relate concealment and revelation, or say repression and power” (p. 168). Acquiring this ability may require in certain ways the assistance or the shunning of others, the refiguration of one’s relations. Persisting in this acquisition is less an object of knowledge than of anxiety and of hope. When, following Emerson, we acknowledge this anxiety and express this hope of continuing return or rebirth, then our “words have the rhetoric of a bargain or a prayer, as in ‘Give us this day our daily bread’; it is not something to take for granted” (p. 171).

Following Cavell in his efforts at rebirth and through his aversiveness has curious effects utterly unlike those of what is usually classed as normal, professional philosophical writing. Cavell’s writing can strike one, in its aversiveness, sometimes as unserious, writerly posturing and sometimes as the only thing that philosophy can and should be, in proceeding from awareness of our continuing uncanny dependence on and transcendence of others. One can feel sometimes that here is a casual spiller of liquid colors and sometimes that here is the only genuinely human voice there is in philosophy, even in letters at all. The writing itself produces “that hesitation between the empirical and the supernatural on which the experience of the fantastic [hence of philosophy] depends” (p. 188). The effect remarkably resembles those that Cavell assigns to the Ancient Mariner’s crossing the line into the polar regions, that is, into reaction against, distrust of, the conventional and acceptance of the uncanny and of hopes of rebirth. This passage into the polar regions, Cavell finds, makes the Mariner incomprehensible, self-absorbed, narcissistic, outside our ordinary language, and lonely (pp. 59, 60, 64). It can feel like this to pass into Cavell’s writing; perhaps at times it feels like this to be Cavell.

Passing into the acceptance of the uncanny, into detachment from the ordinary as it stands and into hope of rebirth within it, with all its continuing uncanniness—that is, following Cavell in his aversive exertions—has obvious stylistic risks. Cavell’s writing can sometimes seem, as he pursues his interest in his own experiences of the uncanny and of the anxieties and hopes of recoveries, to alternate between triteness and sentimentality, on the one hand, and willful obscurity, on the other. Cavell himself is more or

8 Michael Fischer, in his very useful survey focusing on Cavell as a Romantic writer and on the significance of Cavell’s Romanticism for literary theory (Stanley Cavell and Literary Skepticism [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989]), penetratingly notes the affinities between tradi-
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less willing to go on suffering these reactions, as he continues, as he puts it, to “court the transcendental” without quite claiming its possession.

The stylistic risks of Cavell’s aversiveness in courting but not claiming the transcendental themselves are the sign or surface of three internally related limitations, but also strengths, in Cavell’s writing. Cavell’s writing, far more than most traditional Romantic writing, is first of all markedly postreligious and Pelagian. It is as though he thinks that by the very aversiveness, unsettledness, and effort of his writing he could command his own audience and will both the return of the world and his own salvation. There is very little sense of original sin in Cavell’s writing, very little sense of the need for grace and forgiveness. Though Cavell often writes about granting others their autonomy and foregoing the effort to possess them or their sensibilities, he seems less aware of what he may need from them and too ready to try to exert himself strenuously in writing to command his own fate. The strength of this very limitation, however, is that it would be very hard to accuse Cavell of complacency in thought or prose. There is more onwardness to his writing than to that of any other contemporary philosopher or theorist.

Second, Cavell’s writing is distinctly antinomian in its earnestness and in its refusals of doctrine. This antinomianism carries risks of inaccessibility, hermeticism, and uselessness. The writing seems to provide no ground for us to stand on. The countervailing strength here is that Cavell refuses the too-ready sureties of any social or metaphysical theory that might well, like any theory, issue in formulae of tyranny, as Plato saw in founding the state on the education of its legislators rather than on a constitution. We are not to suppose that a formula of value alone can save us.

Third, in taking its departure from the experience of the uncanny, Cavell’s writing is distinctly individualistic and in a way accommodationist to existing institutions. There is very little expression of concern for justice or for how institutions may work to inhibit or promote it. Worrying about one’s own experiences and recoveries threatens to leave everything in the public world as it is. It is no accident that Cavell has taken to describing his interest in Emerson as an interest in urging a kind of individual moral perfectionism. But here, too, there is a countervailing strength. There is very little naïveté in Cavell’s writing about the complexities of the individual person. Theories of justice perforce abstract from these complexities and perhaps undervalue the capabilities of persons. Cavell is

9 Cavell used this phrase in a discussion period following the presentation of some of his recent work on Emerson at a plenary session of the International Association for Philosophy and Literature at Emory University, Atlanta, Ga., in May 1989.
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in contrast ready to linger on just how endlessly divided against themselves, anxious, hopeful, and interesting our, and his, individual expressions are.

There is nothing like Cavell’s attention to the complexities of the expression of our humanity, our uncanny dependence on and transcendence of others, in other pieces of writing and speech and in his own, anywhere else in philosophical writing. Once we have a sense of what this attentiveness can yield, it is very hard, perhaps impossible, to settle for any more immediately accessible and useful, but more primitive, theory of the human and of justice. It is hence unclear whether there could be philosophical writing with the strengths of Cavell’s in attending to our human complexity that was not Pelagian, antinomian, and individualistic. But it seems impossible now to honor any social or metaphysical theory that does not incorporate the complexly suspended readings of our condition and our expressions that Cavell has made available to us. How, one wonders, might we now go on?