

# Moral Perfectionism and Cavell's Romantic Turn

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The first book of Stanley Cavell's that I read is the only book that I ardently wished I had written, *The Pursuits of Happiness: The Hollywood Comedy of Remarriage*. Why this book, and not some high impact, world-historical book like Heidegger's *Being and Time* or Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations*? Well, there are a number of reasons, some of them personal and some of them, well, Cavellian. Most immediately, the book explained to me why I so much enjoyed watching again and again over the course of more than three decades the films which are the objects of Cavell's interpretations — why, in short, watching these films made me so happy, why they filled me with goofy delight, always bringing a smile to my face, a smile not unlike that smile of Cary Grant's (from *Holiday*) reproduced in the pages of *The Pursuits of Happiness*.

The explanation Cavell offered was almost overwhelming in the relief it offered to me, since it allowed me to give an account of what it was I saw in these films, and why it was I could stand to watch them repeatedly, as though I were somehow stuck, not quite getting on with life, not quite ready to “grow up.” (Which, on a Cavellian view, might be saying something about philosophy as an activity involving the education of grown ups, grown ups who for reasons that may not be entirely clear to themselves are not yet ready to “grow up”). The experience of reading *Pursuits of Happiness* manifested for me the meaning of moral perfectionism before I rightly understood it conceptually — it helped me to understand how it works, how one gains imperfectly and incompletely some new degree of self-intelligibility through an encounter with another. So it was that through his readings of these films, Cavell played the role of the “friend” so central to his conception of moral perfectionism, the “friend or figure [...] whose conviction in one's moral intelligibility draws one to discover it, to find words

and deeds in which to express it.”<sup>1</sup> Until my encounter with Cavell’s *Pursuits of Happiness*, I thought I was just indulging in escapist “romantic” fantasies, pleasurable fantasies, but fantasies, nonetheless. I had no idea *my* moral intelligibility was at stake in my response to these re-marriage comedies. Who would have thunk that? Certainly not me, not when I was watching old Hollywood movies that very few people had any interest in, at least not back when I started watching them, on an old black and white TV, courtesy of a Canadian public television program devoted to Hollywood classics — “Saturday Night at the Movies.” Of course, Cavell was watching these films before I was born, having literally and philosophically “grown up” with them.

Now if I had read nothing else of Cavell’s, I would be always grateful for this gift of self-intelligibility. Perhaps, if I were not an academic philosopher, I might not have read anything else, or just restricted myself to Cavell’s other film books, since obviously I’m some kind of film buff. Frankly, I cannot say that Cavell’s other books on film have had the same effect at all, although the essay on the Marx Brothers came close. But the gift of self-intelligibility that came with the reading of *Pursuits of Happiness* was a gift that kept on giving in ways that I could not foresee when I first read it. Cavell’s writing showed me how one could take seriously, in the most philosophical sense of serious, things that philosophers could not treat as philosophically serious, and do so, without taking oneself (so) seriously. Now this is an essential feature of Cavell’s kind of philosophical writing: it not only takes on subjects that philosophy is not supposed to take seriously, it also takes on, simultaneously, the question of what philosophy’s proper subject should be. The metaphilosophical question of what should be philosophy’s proper business is a question that is posed continuously and unashamedly in Cavell’s writing. It is never taken for granted, nor ever fully settled, although Cavell has some pretty definite ideas of what philosophy should be, ideas that conflict with the profession’s view of the business of philosophy, and not just the Anglo-American side of the profession. Moreover, the question of philosophy is at one and the same time posed as the question of one’s own philosophical voice, a voice one must also seek out, treat as a matter of one’s own self-intelligibility, thus placing oneself *as a philosopher* uncomfortably on moral terrain, even if it is not moral in the conventional sense.

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1. Cavell, *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome: The Constitution of Emersonian Perfectionism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), xxxii.

Thus, engaging with Cavell is inevitably to be prompted to engage with the question of what one thinks one is doing when one is doing philosophy, and whether in doing it one is really comfortable in one's own skin — or, put in a more typically Cavellian way, whether one is doing philosophy in a way that the doing of it makes manifest that one's own voice is at stake, and the matter of one's voice is not independent of the matter of one's chosen philosophical problematic. This the moral terrain which Cavell's writing negotiates, the moral terrain on which one is placed (or displaced) through one's philosophical encounter with that (kind of) writing. Put bluntly, the matter of *my* voice must matter to any candidate conception of philosophy if philosophy is to be an activity that facilitates the “education of grown-ups” — if philosophy can itself ever “grow-up.” And if it is to matter at all, it will matter only if *I* take it on, if the matter of philosophising is not separated from the matter of my voice. In other words, if philosophy is to have any chance of “growing up,” and quite often it doesn't look at all like the chances are remotely good, we will have to turn the question of what philosophy's proper business should be into a matter of its self-education, and its self-education a matter of ours.

My first encounter with Cavell was fortuitously at the time I started teaching philosophy, at the moment of full professionalization. As anyone who works or has worked in a department of philosophy will know, the profoundly political but philosophically vacuous distinction between “analytic” and “continental” philosophy can suck out one's soul, like the dreaded Dementors of Harry Potter's school world. Through the gift of self-intelligibility, the gift that keeps on giving, Cavell became an exemplar of how one can steer clear of the pressure to identify with one or another of these philosophical ideologies, seeking out instead alternative identifications in philosophy's past and in its possible future. It was just at this point that “romanticism,” what I began to call “philosophical romanticism,”<sup>2</sup> offered liberation from the fallacious dichotomisation of philosophy into analytic and continental, as if these two options exhausted the logical space of philosophical possibility.

Romanticism was not new to me; my interest in it was long-standing, preceding my career in philosophy, going back to a prior career in music. But Cavell's approach to romanticism was different from those with which I was already familiar,

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2. Nikolas Kompridis, *Philosophical Romanticism* (London: Routledge, 2006).

especially from contemporaries such as Charles Taylor and Richard Rorty who identified romanticism as a particularly important influence, even if they didn't quite identify with romanticism. Cavell's romanticism didn't feel dated or over-ripe, nor deflated and domesticated; it was a romanticism that grew on the soil of the New World, the soil prepared by Thoreau and Emerson, and it was still fresh, still alive with possibilities, which I was keen to explore and realise. Moreover, Cavell's willingness to stake his own philosophical identity in going "romantic," so to speak, gave me courage to do the same. My impression is that this going romantic was not so much an explicit philosophical decision as it was an exercise of full sensibility; that going romantic *is* the exercise of full sensibility — an exercise not without its own particular risks and challenges.<sup>3</sup>

I have only alluded, barely, to what it was about Cavell's *Pursuits of Happiness* that spoke to me so directly and intimately that made me wish intensely that *I* had written it. What was the explanation that Cavell offered for the experience of happiness that was pleasurably repeated in each and every viewing of *Bringing Up Baby* (1938), *The Lady Eve* (1941), *The Awful Truth* (1937), and *His Girl Friday* (1940)? Well, it was that people can, and, improbably, do change, and, indeed, under conditions that would seem to be the most adverse conditions under which to change — such as when they have they lost their way, when their connection to others, to what most matters to them, breaks down, when they become unintelligible to themselves, rendering them incapable of going on as before, not knowing how to go on, either as whom, or with whom. What is more, the improbable change they undergo is shown to be *complexly pleasurable*, not just hard, bloody painful work on oneself. Complexly pleasurable, because the pleasure in question is composed of both pain and pleasure, the pain of change and its attendant joy. The change the characters undergo is a change they pleasurably let happen, knowing full well that they are thereby making themselves vulnerable to both pain and embarrassment, if not shame and regret as well, a change they are capable of pre-reflectively affirming even if they are not yet ready reflectively to justify the reasons for the change they are letting themselves undergo.

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3. For my own views of romanticism and its contemporary renewal, see the following: "Romanticism," in Richard Eldridge (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophy and Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 247-270; "Re-Inheriting Philosophical Romanticism," in Nikolas Kompridis, *Philosophical Romanticism*, 1-17; and "The Idea of a New Beginning: A Romantic Source of Normativity and Freedom," 32-59.

No one in the comedies of re-marriage better exemplifies this kind of change than Cary Grant's character in *Bringing Up Baby*, Dr. David Huxley aka David Bone aka Jerry the Nipper, who, whenever he is around the character portrayed by Katherine Hepburn, society heiress, Susan Vance, finds himself behaving in ways that are completely unintelligible to himself and to those around him. But the truth is that at the point when David meets Susan he is someone who has already lost his way, but Susan, playing the role of the Emersonian or Cavellian friend manifests both David's lostness to himself, and "another way" through which to recover his self-intelligibility. At a decisive moment in the film, David says to Susan: "Now it isn't that I don't like you, Susan, because, after all, in moments of quiet, I'm strangely drawn toward you, but — well, there haven't *been* any quiet moments." Which is another way for David to say, I'm having the time of my life, but I'm deeply confused about why this is so, since at the very same time my life as I have known it is unravelling at a frightening speed in the most inexplicable way. Change is not very often as complexly pleasurable as it so obviously is for David Huxley through his various adventures with Susan Vance; but it is a question why *our* typical attitude towards such change is that it must be joyless, unromantic, a painful burden — How did being romantic become so closely identified with being unrealistic, such that change of this kind comes to be seen as too demanding, too risky, to threatening?

Apropos, in the preface to *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome*, Cavell asks:

What makes change [...] hard? Why does it suggest violence? Why, asked otherwise, is perfectionism (apparently) rare? How may a perfectionist [...] account for the apparent fact that so few people choose to live it, but instead apparently choose lives of what Thoreau calls quiet desperation, what Emerson calls silent melancholy? Why is this perpetual pain preferred to the *apparent* pain of turning?<sup>4</sup>

This question is as impertinent as it is unavoidable, and yet for all the force of its impertinent insight it is a question that poses the matter of change one-sidedly, twice over. Cavell is right to ask why it is that there is a standing preference for the perpet-

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4. Cavell, *Conditions*, xxxi (my emphasis).

ual pain of a life that remains unturned to the “apparent” pain of turning. However, is it not also the case that a life that remains unturned *requires* (and does not merely just *suggest*) violence to remain a life that is not for turning? How else can one lead a life without bearing the demands of moral perfectionism, with its morally distinctive “emphasis before all on becoming intelligible to oneself.”<sup>5</sup> The only thing that can justify such an emphasis is the understandably elusive knowledge that a standing “threat to one’s moral coherence comes most insistently from that quarter, from one’s sense of obscurity to oneself, as if we are subject to demands we cannot formulate, leaving us unjustified, as if our lives condemn themselves.”<sup>6</sup> Becoming unresponsive to that threat surely must involve a violence of refusal, and of avoidance, so it is then just as important to ask not only why we are attached to lives not responsive to the demands of moral perfectionism, but also to notice the violence that we must endure at our own hand, so to speak, in order to refuse, and to avoid, those demands — to deny they make any claims on us, for after all those demands do not arise from a philosophical doctrine but from human as well as non-human others with whom we share a form of life.

Now as I have indicated above there is another reason to be wary of Cavell’s one-sided framing of the task of change as suggesting violence, and that is provided in many of the splendid films that produce his stunning insights in *The Pursuits of Happiness*. Change can be hard, yes, threatening, yes, demanding, yes, but change can also involve pleasure, too; complex pleasure intermingled with pain, to be sure, but pleasure nonetheless, lots of it, suggesting something very different from violent change. From which it follows that the work of change has to be conceived differently, in richer and more capacious terms, suggesting, promising, the pursuit of happiness, let’s say, something like a utopia, a place where we can be at home in the world, where the world is what we come home to when we are at home.

[W]hat is it about our work, and our ideas of work, that keeps the things we most want to happen from happening... Is there a way alternative to the romantic to ask the question? If you do not produce such an alternative; and if nevertheless you desire to keep hold of the question; then you will have not

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5. Cavell, *Conditions*, xxxi.

6. *Ibid.*, xxxi-xxxii.

only to conclude that we are not beyond the demands of romanticism, but you will have to hope that the demands of romanticism are not beyond us.<sup>7</sup>

For reasons I will make all the more explicitly shortly, I do not think Cavell should be posing the first set of questions regarding the pain and violence of change, of its refusal and avoidance, from the standpoint of his moral perfectionism; rather, he should be posing them from the standpoint of his romanticism, proposing that the demands of moral perfectionism are internal to the demands of romanticism. Thus the first set of questions should be posed from within the standpoint of the second set of questions concerning what it is about our work and “our ideas of work, that keeps the things we most want to happen from happening.” I would argue that if we were to rethink Cavell’s conception of moral perfectionism from the ground up, we would see it as a species of romanticism, not as something that stands apart from or even complements the romanticism that Cavell came rather emphatically to espouse at about the same time as he came to espouse his moral perfectionism. (Genealogically speaking, both are an effect of, but not exclusively an effect of, his readings of Thoreau and Emerson.) Refiguring the demands of moral perfectionism as a form of romantic perfectionism extends those demands from a concern with self-intelligibility to a concern with fostering the conditions for the transformation of culture. A passage from Emerson’s “Circles” that Cavell is fond of citing captures the proper response to this latter concern, quite well, quite romantically: “A new degree of culture would instantly revolutionize the entire system of human pursuits.”<sup>8</sup>

As Cavell figures it, moral perfectionism’s “emphasis before all on becoming intelligible to oneself” is continuous with its emphasis “on culture and cultivation,” which is “to be understood in connection to this search for intelligibility [...] this search for direction in what seems to be a scene of moral chaos [...] the scene of the dark place in which one has lost one’s way.<sup>9</sup> For the romanticism that Cavell inherits from Emerson and Thoreau and rearticulates, the state of having lost one’s way, finding oneself in a scene of moral chaos, is not just something particular to one individual, a matter of contingency or chance; rather, it is essential to “their vision that the

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7. Cavell, *This New Yet Unapproachable America* (Albuquerque: Living Batch Press, 1989), 113-114.

8. Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Essays: First and Second Series* (New York: Vintage, 1990), 178.

9. Cavell, *Conditions*, xxxii.

world as a whole requires attention, say redemption, that it lies fallen, dead; it is essential to what we call their romanticism.”<sup>10</sup> Hence the importance of words that demand or draw “conversion” or “transfiguration” or “reattachment,” and which are themselves internal to the processes through which we exercise, practise, culture and cultivation, not as bourgeois indulgences but as normative stances from which we redeem the world and thereby ourselves.

Why does it matter whether moral perfectionism is part of Cavell’s romanticism? Because it is Cavell’s romanticism, and not his modernism, that is the best and most significant gesture of Cavell’s entire oeuvre. It is also the framework within which we should situate his work on scepticism, looking at his romanticism as a response to scepticism, as he defines it. The story that must be told to capture Cavell’s transition from modernism to romanticism would have to begin from its very first appearance, announcing itself inexplicably but urgently in the second half of *The Claim of Reason*. As he wrote retrospectively some years later, the “outbreaks” of romantic texts at the very point at which he was trying to bring his investigations to a satisfying conclusion (“threatening the end of my story”) were “outbreaks” of an intuition, which at the time he could barely explain, let alone, justify.<sup>11</sup> But the “pressures” to make sense of these “outbreaks” preoccupied him for some time thereafter, such that he had to ask himself: “What is philosophy for me, or what has it begun showing itself to be, that it should call for, and call for these, romantic orientations or transgressions?”<sup>12</sup>

I do not have the space here to give an account of Cavell’s transition from modernism to romanticism, and the pivotal causal role that his investigations of scepticism played.<sup>13</sup> Even without such an account, one can nonetheless infer quite a lot simply from the position that Emerson and Thoreau came to occupy as his most important interlocutors, and whose New World romanticism became the model of his own. Who could be less modernist, more susceptible to modernist scorn and irony,

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10. Cavell, *America*, 82.

11. Cavell, *In Quest of the Ordinary: Lines of Skepticism and Romanticism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 6.

12. *Ibid.*, ix.

13. For a full account of the connection between Cavell’s romanticism and/as his response to skepticism, see Nikolas Kompridis, “Romanticising Skepticism: Cavell, Philosophy, and the Redemption of Human Nature,” in Stephen Heatherington and David MacArthur (eds.), *Living Skepticism* (Leiden: Brill, 2015).



than Emerson and Thoreau? Cavell certainly did not make it easy for himself. In order to become responsive to two thinkers who in Cavell's time had become so "untimely," in Nietzsche's sense, as to be almost beyond the reach of our hearing, he had to set aside, and leave behind, the much more respectable modernist problematics that were the preoccupation of a number of the essays in *Must We Mean What We Say?* Who, today, would be responsive to the words of Emerson and Thoreau as words that philosophers are obliged to hear — to hear in their terms not ours, to hear as writers *and* philosophers — had Cavell had not made us aware of their "mode of illumination," their philosophical styles of staking themselves in their writing, allowing us to hear them (again) as if for the first time? Listening to them and hearing them in such a careful and attentive way that he could release their words in the less than hospitable intellectual atmosphere of our late modern, irony-infected time, such that they could shimmer and dazzle and perplex and puzzle with all the force of new words and new perspectives, as though never uttered before. I should not hesitate to describe this intellectual achievement, an achievement of sensibility as much as of intellect, as itself performing romanticism in Cavell's Emersonian and Thoreauian sense, and manifesting for us another way to read and write of and for the other.

If we were to speculate on the reasons why Cavell quietly abandoned his modernist concerns for his embrace of romanticism, particularly in its Emersonian and Thoreauian forms, one of the most important might be the realisation that there was something about the way romantics conceived of the future, that made the future the object of a special concern and praxis, requiring every effort to keep the future open, to prevent it from being foreclosed, either through conformity to or fixation with our currently available possibilities. It may have therefore been the realisation that modernism was both an insufficiently reflective form of skepticism and an insufficiently reflective response to skepticism. Having itself become deadened to the world (through disappointment with it), it had become incapable of responding to the world as possibly redeemable, as somehow in need of redemption — but from what, then, and with what?

In a short but remarkable essay, "The Future of Possibility," which could just as easily and accurately have been entitled, "The Possibility of a Future," Cavell's opening remarks on the occasion which led to its writing, reveals his romantic undertaking as a response to the counter-romantic mood of our times.

In 1994, invitations to the Sixth *Le Monde* Forum held at Le Mans, with the title “The Future Today,” posed to its participants an introductory statement for discussion that contained the following passage: “Everything is worn out: revolutions, profits, miracles. The planet itself shows signs of fatigue and breakdown, from the ozone layer to the temperature of the oceans.” The disappointed or counter-romantic mood of this passage produced the following intervention from me, one that has distinctly affected my work since that time.

Keep in mind that I come from that part of the world for which the question of old and new — call it the question of a human future — is, or was, logically speaking, a matter of life and death: if the new world is not new then America does not exist, it is merely one more outpost of old oppressions. Americans like Thoreau (and if Thoreau then Emerson and Walt Whitman, to say no more) seem to have lived so intensely or intently within the thought of a possible, and possibly closed, future that a passage like the one I just cited would be bound to have struck them as setting, that is putting on view and enforcing, an old mood.<sup>14</sup>

If we now see that the New World is not new, and that “America” does not exist, does that mean that a “new world” is out of our reach, that the future is closed to us? How is philosophy to respond to this? From where does it respond? Does it, can it, draw its response only from itself? Which self? What would philosophy have to become to be responsive to circumstances in which futurity itself is at stake (and not just its own)? Cavell has always been a philosopher who did not shy away from metaphilosophical reflections about what it is philosophy is or should be. But only with his turn to romanticism could he speak of philosophy’s task in these terms — the romantic redemption of the very possibility of the human:

Philosophy’s peculiar task now — that which will not be taken up if philosophy does not take it up — is, beyond or before that, to prepare us, one by one, for the business of justice; and to train itself for the task of preparation by

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14. Cavell, “The Future of Possibility,” in Nikolas Kompridis (ed.), *Philosophical Romanticism* (London: Routledge), 21.

confronting an obstacle, perhaps the modern obstacle, to that business: I mean a sense of the exhaustion of human possibility, following the exhaustion of divine possibility.<sup>15</sup>

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15. Cavell, "Future," 27.