

The Merge: Underwriting Underwriting

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Who need be afraid of the merge?

WALT WHITMAN, *Leaves of Grass*

1. Underwriting Ordinary Language Philosophy

One of the most distinctive features of Cavell's continuation of Ordinary Language Philosophy is his conviction that the procedures of Austin and Wittgenstein are *underwritten* by the writing of Emerson and of Thoreau. Breaking into the middle of a sentence from 1986, we find Cavell expressing this conviction:

I am in fact armed with names, before all of Emerson and of Thoreau, whose emphasis on what they call the common, the everyday, the near, the low, I have in recent years repeatedly claimed as underwriting the ordinariness sought in the ordinary language methods of Wittgenstein and of Austin.¹

Cavell's conviction that there is an American transcendentalist underwriting of the philosophical return to the ordinary appears in his writings only after the completion, in 1979, of *The Claim of Reason*, and I suspect there is a story to tell about how the completion of that book, the writing of its inimitable Part IV, prepared the ground for that conviction.² For the moment, I leave the telling of that story to others. In this pa-

1. Cavell, "Declining Decline," in *This New Yet Unapproachable America*. (Albuquerque, NM: Living Batch Press, 1989), 34.

2. In the "Foreword" to *The Claim of Reason* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), Cavell acknowledges that one of the reasons it was difficult to complete that book was that his books on Thoreau and on film, which were completed after finishing his dissertation in 1961, had "outstripped" the results of that dissertation (xviii). Cavell, himself, dates his suggestion that Emerson and Thoreau underwrite ordinary language philosophy to the completion of *The Claim of Reason* in Cavell, "The Politics of Interpretation," in *Themes out of School* (San Francisco: North Point Press, 1984), 33. The claim to underwriting may even be one way, not the only one, of beginning an answer to the question on which *The Claim of Reason* ends: "But can philosophy become literature and know itself?" (496).

per I simply want to understand what Cavell might have meant by the claim to a transcendentalist underwriting of the ordinary, and in addition, to suggest that this underwriting could be even further secured by including what Whitman calls “the merge” and “the outlet.”³ This paper is therefore a contribution to determining Whitman’s position in Cavell’s writing, both why Whitman’s voice is so rarely invoked, and how Whitman’s voice might have supplemented that of Emerson and of Thoreau. My suggestion is that Whitman’s merge underwrites the underwriting.

But first what is the claim to underwriting? I think I always supposed that the underwriting was some sort of insurance: the procedures of Emerson and Thoreau ensuring that the procedures of Austin and Wittgenstein would be successful. In a lecture on Emerson from January 1978, but without yet invoking the figure of *underwriting*, Cavell includes a paragraph:

While I find that this sense of intimacy with existence, or intimacy lost, is fundamental to the experience of what I understand ordinary language philosophy to be, I am for myself convinced that the thinkers who convey this experience best, most directly and most practically, are not such as Austin and Wittgenstein but such as Emerson and Thoreau. This sense of my natural relation to existence is what Thoreau means by our being *next* to the laws of nature, by our *neighboring* the world, by our being *beside* ourselves. Emerson’s idea of the *near* is one of the inflections he gives to the common, the low.⁴

As shocking, as for many it still is, to read Cavell thus privileging Emerson and Thoreau over Austin and Wittgenstein, most of that being shocked remains the result of a certain professional snobbishness of philosophers, perhaps towards literature in general, but at least towards those two literary authors who once thrived in the curricula of US-American high schools. If those philosophers could get over their snob shock, they would discover something about Cavell’s conviction that, once seen, is almost obvious.⁵ This: if the everyday drove us to metaphysics in the first place, the

3. Whitman, *Leaves of Grass* (Minneola NY: Dover Publications, 2007), 34 and 94.

4. Cavell, *The Senses of Walden*, expanded edn. (San Francisco: North Point Press, 1981), 145-46.

5. *Almost obvious*: in my case, I was helped to see this obvious point by a conversational observation of Brett Topey.

return to the everyday will never stabilize unless we address ourselves not only to philosophical language but to everyday language itself. That is why the inhabitants of Concord are needed to underwrite the inhabitants of Oxford and Cambridge. But how? There are three stages.

Here is a citation from Wittgenstein: “What *we* do is to bring words back from their metaphysical to their everyday use.”⁶ All by itself, this suggests the following two stage movement, away from the everyday to the metaphysical and then back again. If you were feeling a little mean, you might have predicted that once we had thus returned to the everyday, then whatever drove us from the everyday in the first place would likely drive us back to the metaphysical again, and Cavell, himself, recognizes this. In the midst of a discussion of marriage in Mozart’s *Figaro*, Cavell notes that given “the relation I earlier proposed between marriage and skepticism,” the fact that marriage, in that opera, is manageable, means that “the world is successfully, if momentarily, called back from its skeptical annihilation.”⁷ Successfully, but momentarily. There can be no final overcoming of the temptations to metaphysics, rather our lives are characterized by a kind of metastability, oscillating between die Ruhe and die Unruhe, between quiet and disquiet, settled and unsettled.⁸

This is standard Cavellian stuff, it even projects his opposition to Derrida in whose work Cavell sees nothing like peace, quiet, or die Ruhe.⁹ But where’s the underwriting? We can come to see the need for such an underwriting if we read the entire section of the *Investigations* from which our one citation was cut:

116. When philosophers use a word—“knowledge,” “being,” “object,” “I,” “proposition/sentence [Satz],” “name”—and try to grasp the *essence* of the thing, one must always ask oneself: is the word ever actually used in this way in the language in which it is at home?

What *we* do is to bring words back from their metaphysical to their everyday use.¹⁰

6. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, rev. 4th edn., trans. G.E.M. Anscombe, P.M.S. Hacker, and Joachim Schulte (Malden MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), §116.

7. Cavell, *A Pitch of Philosophy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994), 153.

8. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, §111 and §133.

9. See Gordon C. F. Bearn, “Sounding Serious: Cavell and Derrida,” *Representations* 63 (1998): 65-92.

10. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, §116.

Wittgenstein applied his therapies to famous philosophical words. He worried that these apparently important words had slipped away from their homes in the everyday to philosophy, from the everyday to metaphysics, and his leading them back home, therefore required *philosophical* investigations. Emerson and Thoreau are less particular. Emerson for instance, in a signature Cavellian passage, tells us that one of the deadening effects of the “virtue in most request,”¹¹ conformity, is that:

This conformity makes them [(most men)] not false in a few particulars, authors of a few lies, but false in all particulars. Their every truth is not quite true. Their two is not the real two, their four is not the real four; so that every word they say chagrins us, and we know not where to begin to set them right.¹²

Every word, not just the famous philosophical ones, every word they say, breaks our hearts. One way Emerson and Thoreau may underwrite the procedures of Austin and Wittgenstein is by doing for *every word of our language* what ordinary language philosophers set out to do for a few.¹³

There is something those ordinary language philosophers did not manage to do. We met this idea already: “Austin’s and Wittgenstein’s attacks on philosophy, and on skepticism in particular—in appealing to what they call the ordinary or everyday use of words—are counting on some intimacy between language and world that they were never able satisfactorily to give an account of.”¹⁴ If we let Emerson and Thoreau account for that intimacy then there will be three stages in this practice of the ordinary. (1) In the first stage, our sense of disappointment or unease with the emptiness of the words of our everyday language motivates metaphysical inventions which, themselves, prove disappointing. We thought the problem with everyday language was that it wasn’t abstract enough, so to understand the meaning of a sentence we needed to introduce *the proposition*. But our unease derived not from a lack of abstraction, but from its surfeit. Everyday language felt an empty system of conformity, and so we should never have expected an even more abstract formalism would be our

11. Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Essays and Lectures* (New York: Library of America, 1983), 261.

12. *Ibid.*, 264.

13. On this “every word in our language” see Cavell, *This New Yet Unapproachable America*, 81.

14. *Ibid.*, 81.

cure. It's a familiar story: "One puts to one's lips what drives one yet faster into the abyss."¹⁵ (2) In the second stage, the likes of Austin and Wittgenstein lead us from this metaphysical disquiet back to the rough granular ground of the everyday. (3) In the third stage, Emerson and Thoreau, addressing themselves to every word in our language, attend to the heart breaking discovery that nobody seriously means what they say, they attend to the very chagrin which incited our yearning for metaphysical salvation in the first place. It is this third stage which Cavell speaks of as the transcendentalist underwriting of ordinary language philosophy. The methods of Austin and Wittgenstein presupposed that the everyday itself was enough, and so it may be, but only if the everyday manages with the help of Emerson and Thoreau to turn from conformity, from the empty conformism of our daily life and language. These three stages project much more than a single book, indeed Cavell has written some of them already. In the next section, I will only take on the more defined topic of the appearance of stage three in Cavell's *The Senses of Walden*, first published in 1972.¹⁶ It is in that book that Cavell puts what he will come to call underwriting in terms that should guide anyone's discussion of this subject:

Thoreau is doing with our ordinary assertions what Wittgenstein does with our more patently philosophical assertions—bringing them back to a context in which they are alive.¹⁷

I will approach this project through what Cavell doesn't quite call Thoreau's mysticism.

2. Granular Mysticism in Cavell's Thoreau

"As if you could kill time without injuring eternity."¹⁸ Thoreau's words prickle with life. Called simply "Words," Cavell's first chapter is an attempt to understand the life

15. Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Case of Wagner*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Random House, 1967) §5. (Thanks to Joe Volpe for this reference.)

16. Cavell, *The Senses of Walden*.

17. *Ibid.*, 92. Timothy Gould provides what might be an interpretation of this very passage in his *Hearing Things* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1998), 111.

18. Henry David Thoreau, *Walden*, in *The Portable Thoreau*, ed. J.S. Cramer (New York: Penguin, 2012), 203.

of Thoreau's words. And before Cavell has even come to the end of his third paragraph, the first words he cites from *Walden* are about words:

The heroic books, even if printed in the character of our mother tongue, will always be in a language dead to degenerate times; and we must laboriously seek the meaning of each word and line, conjecturing a larger sense than common use permits out of what wisdom and valor and generosity we have.¹⁹

Already you can see, by the appeal to “degenerate times,” that Cavell may be enlisting Thoreau to emphasize the existential sources—the quiet desperation, the “deep disquietudes”—that Wittgenstein characterizes as the impulse to philosophy.²⁰ This first citation tells us that in degenerate times such as Thoreau's and Wittgenstein's and ours, the words of heroic books will be dead to us, even if written in our mother tongue. Of course, this is not because the words of those heroic texts are dead, but because one symptom of our degeneracy is that the words of our mother tongue are already dead, however instrumental in common use they nevertheless prove to be.

We tie our shoes habitually, without thinking, and so too we mostly converse without thinking, just passing on what we have heard, about the news, or sports, or the new exhibition, or the movie we have just seen, or how unbelievable it is that he said that to her. That is why Deleuze and Guattari write: “We believe that narrative consists not in communicating what one has seen but in transmitting what one has heard, what someone else has said to you. Hearsay.”²¹ Deleuze elaborates this account of communication in a passage I will quote at length for its description of the subjection of our lives to what Emerson would call “conformity”:

Primarily communication is the transmission and propagation of information. What is information? It is not very complicated, everyone knows what it is. Information is a set of imperatives, slogans, directions—order words. When you are informed you are told what what you are supposed to believe. Police declara-

19. Thoreau, *Walden*, 279; cited in Cavell, *The Senses of Walden*, 4.

20. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, §111.

21. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 76.

tions are appropriately called *communiqués*. Information is communicated to us, they tell us what we are supposed to be ready to, or have to, or be held to believe. And not even believe, but pretend like we believe. We are not asked to believe but to behave as if we did. That is information, communication [...]. This is the same thing as saying that information is exactly the system of control.²²

Deleuze offers us this picture of communication emptied of belief, communication reduced to enforcing conformity, because he has tasted something else: acts of resistance, works of art. Like Bach. “Bach’s speech act is that his music is an act of resistance, an active struggle against the separation of the profane and the sacred. This act of resistance ends in a cry.”²³ Aunt Hester’s shriek.²⁴

This account of communication and information adds Deleuze to the list of people who feel that there is something disquietingly conformist or formal about what passes for communication, communication itself reduced to hearsay, informing become conforming. Austin, in his writings, was concerned with this phenomenon but almost exclusively as it appears in that part of linguistic life professionalized by philosophers. Wittgenstein, too, mostly wrote about this phenomenon in a philosophical context; although he could confess to being unsure whether he would “prefer a continuation of [his] work by others to a change in the way people live which would make all these questions superfluous.”²⁵ Cavell reminds us that while even Austin can remark that a certain idea of incorrigibility is “perhaps the original sin [...] by which the philosopher casts himself out of from the garden of the world we live in,” nevertheless this existentially turned remark is “momentary and uncharacteristic.”²⁶ It is uncharacteristic for Austin; because in a move that strangely anticipates the resolute new Wittgensteinians, this sin is simply in error, to be set aside, resolutely, once and for all. This is not true for Wittgenstein as Cavell reads him, on that account this sin is a permanent temptation,

22. Gilles Deleuze, “What is a creative act?,” in *Two Regimes of Madness: Texts and Interviews 1975–1995*, ed. David Lapoujade, trans. Ames Hodges and Michael Taormina (New York: Semiotext(e), 2006), 320–21.

23. *Ibid.*, 323–24.

24. Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* (New York: Dover Publications, 1995), 4–5. Aunt Hester’s shriek is used to help motivate Fred Moten’s astonishing book: *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003).

25. Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1980), 61e.

26. J. L. Austin, “Other Minds,” in *Philosophical Papers*, 3rd edn. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), 90. Cavell’s “momentary and uncharacteristic” come from his “The Wittgensteinian Event,” in *Philosophy The Day After Tomorrow* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005), 195.

its overcoming never completed, but ever anew to be achieved. Thoreau, Emerson, Cavell, Deleuze, and as we shall see, even Whitman recognize the existential work necessary to overcome the emptiness of common use, of conformalism. But they resolve it in different ways. Deleuze's cry might remind some of a certain barbaric yawp, but my immediate focus will be on Cavell's Thoreauvian resolution in terms of a *perfect nextness*, and Whitman's resolution in terms of *the merge*.

Now back to that first citation from *Walden*, the one about heroic books being written in a language dead to those whose linguistic horizons are fixed by the conformalism of common use. Thoreau tells us that heroic books demand that we "laboriously seek the meaning of each word and line, conjecturing a larger sense than common use permits."²⁷ And while you might have thought that this larger sense would be looser than common use, it is just the opposite. Cavell tells us this larger sense is to be "utterly specific."²⁸ When we speak of killing time we do not mean what we say. Heroic books do.

Heroic books are written not in our mother tongue which we speak mindlessly, habitually. Thoreau tells us the mother tongue is "commonly transitory, a sound, a tongue, a dialect merely, almost brutish, and we learn it unconsciously of our mothers."²⁹ A mere sound, so barely even enjoying semantic power, it is like a brake-lever in a locomotive. Heroic books are written in what Thoreau distinguishes as a father tongue, "a reserved and select expression, too significant to be heard by the ear, which we must be born again in order to speak."³⁰ A father tongue is so semantically charged that it can't be heard at all. The work of our mother tongue is by sound, operating on our activities like orders to brutes. Slab! The work of our father tongue, the language of heroic books, is entirely at the level of meaning, it may have a sonic form but that is as irrelevant to heroic writing as whether the chess piece is made of stone, wood, or plastic. Heroic language invokes by sound or sight, but unessentially, not this or that common use of a word, not even two uses at once as in pun play. The heroic use of a word invokes what Cavell describes as "the entire language from which a word is woven."³¹

27. Thoreau, *Walden*, 279,

28. Cavell, *The Senses of Walden*, 16.

29. Thoreau, *Walden*, 280.

30. *Ibid.*

31. Cavell, *The Senses of Walden*, 104. This expression arrives at the end of a paragraph that includes these two sentences: "This is the writer's faith—confidence that what we are accustomed to call, say, 'connotations' of words, the most evanescent of the shadows they cast, are as available between us as what we call their 'denotations.' That *in fact* we do not normally avail ourselves of them is a comment on our lives and shows our continuing need for art."

Cavell knows of course that Thoreau often plays with his words, but he tells us that when this happens it is because Thoreau is sometimes “content to rest from his mightier or migratory flights and let his words warble and chuckle to themselves (e.g., pun and alliterate), pleased as it were just with his own notes for company, or as he puts it elsewhere, humming while he works.”³² So Thoreau puns when he rests from his heroic labors. And yet what we take for punning might be heroic after all. For if the heroic use of a word stretches out to the entire language from which the word is woven then each of the common uses invoked by a pun will inevitably be part of what is woven into that word. Perhaps for heroic writing, as Derrida risks suggesting for all writing, there might not be any puns.³³

This still leaves us wondering how to understand the weaving of an entire language into the use of a word. Perhaps we should begin with what Cavell calls the “ontological condition of words; the occurrence of an object whose placement always has a point, and whose point always lies before and beyond it.”³⁴ Is this what is happening: The force of the entire history of the language funnels into the present occurrence of an object and then rushes out the other side towards the future. Is the claim that when this does happen to an object, then it becomes a word, or rather a *heroic*, utterly specific word? Is this always happening, whenever, even in common use, we speak or write. Then our challenge would be to accept or to acknowledge that fact.

Here is Cavell:

A written word, as it recurs page after page, changing its company and modifying its occasions, must show its integrity under these pressures—as though the fact that all of its occurrences in the book of pages are simultaneously there, awaiting one another, demonstrates that our words need not haunt us. If we learn to *entrust* our meaning to a word, the weight it carries through all its computations will yet prove to be just the weight we will find we wish to give it.³⁵

32. *Ibid.*, 41.

33. Consider Jacques Derrida’s comment on his book *Glas* (1974), “Proverb: He that would pun...” in John P. Leavy, *Glassary* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1986), 17.: “contrary to the rumor and to what some would like to have you believe, in that book there is not one single *pun*.”

34. Cavell, *The Senses of Walden*, 27.

35. *Ibid.*, 34-35 (emphasis mine).

It sounds like that turn in Emerson's "Self-Reliance" when self-trust turns out to demand not the explicitly voluntary but on its opposite: "Every man discriminates between the voluntary acts of his mind, and his involuntary perceptions, and knows that to his involuntary perceptions a perfect faith is due."³⁶ Cavell gives us some guide as to how this is to be accomplished in the domain of writing, heroic writing. It requires that we "assume responsibility [...] for three features of the language [heroic writing] lives upon."³⁷ Cavell leads off with with this feature: "every mark of a language means something in the language, one thing rather than another; that a language is totally, systematically meaningful."³⁸ The second feature of heroic language is that human beings by meaning their words reveal or conceal their beliefs, and finally the third feature is that the context within which humans mean the words they produce, that is, where and when and how humans produce those words, is just as important to the meaning of what is said as the ordered words themselves.³⁹ Heroic writing is utterly specific because it attends so precisely to the where and the when and the how of linguistic life that each word, as meant by myself, can only mean one thing. It's not quite a recipe, but it is an articulation of our heroic responsibilities.

The challenge to write thus heroically, finally articulates the ways in which, for Cavell, the philosophical procedures of Austin and Wittgenstein are underwritten by Emerson and Thoreau: "This sense of my natural relation to existence is what Thoreau means by our being *next* to the laws of nature, by our *neighboring* the world, by our being *beside* ourselves."⁴⁰ Beside oneself, Cavell reminds us, is how the dictionary defines "ecstasy."⁴¹ Here is Thoreau:

With thinking we may be beside ourselves in a sane sense. By a conscious effort of the mind we can stand aloof from actions and their consequences; and all things, good and bad, go by us like a torrent. We are not wholly involved in nature.⁴²

36. Emerson, *Essays and Lectures*, 269.

37. Cavell, *The Senses of Walden*, 33-34.

38. *Ibid.*, 34.

39. *Ibid.*

40. *Ibid.*, 146.

41. *Ibid.*, 104.

42. Thoreau, *Walden*, 307; qtd. in Cavell, *The Senses of Walden*, 102.

Inhabiting heroic language is the way we come to be next to the world of things, the precision of heroic speech draws us absolutely or maximally near or next to things without yet dissolving into the evening air. And at last we are coming up on Thoreau's granular mysticism.

Cavell broaches the subject by writing that for Thoreau, and probably for Cavell himself: "Our relation to nature, at its best, would be that of neighboring it—knowing the grandest laws it is executing, while nevertheless 'not wholly involved' in them."⁴³ At which point he cites a passage from *Walden* in which Thoreau confesses "I experienced sometimes that the most sweet and tender, the most innocent and encouraging society may be found in any natural object [...] an infinite and unaccountable friendliness all at once like the atmosphere sustaining me."⁴⁴ And then after parenthetically interrupting himself, Cavell comments about this idea of being nature's closest possible neighbor: "You may call this mysticism; but it is a very peculiar view of the subject; it is not what the inexperienced may imagine as the claim to union or absorption in nature."⁴⁵ Just out of earshot we can almost hear Cavell asserting that the ordinary is underwritten by the mystical.

It will put some people in mind of the *Tractatus*, for in Wittgenstein's book, it almost seems as if the ability to understand logic and therefore language, at all, is underwritten by the mystical. There is an experience which is not an experience that is required if we are to understand logic, and therefore language. The *Tractatus* characterizes it this way:

5.552 The "experience" that we need in order to understand logic is not that something or other is the state of things, but that something *is*: that, however, is *not* an experience.

Logic is *prior* to every experience—that something *is* so.

It is prior to the question "How?," not prior to the question "What?"⁴⁶

And this experience which is not an experience is what that book, in its dizzying con-

43. Cavell, *The Senses of Walden*, 105.

44. Thoreau, *Walden*, 304; qtd. in Cavell, *The Senses of Walden*, 105.

45. Cavell, *The Senses of Walden*, 105-6.

46. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1961), 5.552.

cluding remarks, calls the mystical. “Mystical” enters the *Tractatus* in two propositions. Here is the first:

6.44 It is not *how* things are in the world that is mystical, but *that* it exists.⁴⁷

The experience which is not an experience that we need if we are to understand logic is not that the world is this way rather than that, it is that there is a world. And the mystical is just that, the fact that is not a fact, that there is a world. Two more things are said about this in the next numbered proposition.

6.45 To view the world *sub specie aeterni* is to view it as a whole—a limited whole.

Feeling the world as a limited whole—it is this that is mystical.⁴⁸

The “experience” [Die “Erfahrung”] which we need in order to understand logic is not an experience, it is a feeling [Das Gefühl] of the world as a limited whole, and that feeling is the mystical. So in the *Tractatus*, setting aside the question of its self-destruction, we seem to be told that logic is underwritten by the mystical.

The mystical underwriting in Cavell’s *Walden* is different from this. The *Tractatus* insists that in the absence of a mystical feeling of the world as limited whole, we would not be able to *apply* logic to the world.⁴⁹ In Cavell it is not the experience of the world *as limited whole* which underwrites our life with language, for Cavell the mystical underwriting is *granular*. I mean the word “granular” to reflect the fact that for Cavell there is no one feeling, no one general ground for the *applicability* of language to the world, no single transcendental deduction for all the categories of thought. For Cavell, the use of *each word* demands its own deduction. That is the granularity of Cavell’s mystical underwriting, and in the absence of such granular deductions our linguistic life will be reduced to the emptiness of a ritual conformism. Our words slipping off the things of the world. Every word they say chagrins us, and so every word must be redeemed, “as if not just twelve categories but any and every word in our language

47. *Ibid.*, 6.44.

48. *Ibid.*, 6.45.

49. *Ibid.*, 5.5521.

stands under the necessity of deduction, or say derivation.”⁵⁰ And now we we have a sketch of what such a deduction would involve. We need to stop forcing words to do our bidding, which just mechanizes them. Instead we should listen to the words' own voices, responding to all the contexts in which they have already lived and all the situations into which they might be projected. It's an enormous responsibility. We should “entrust our meaning to a word, the weight it carries through all its computations.”⁵¹

“Computations” will seem an odd word to use here, but only because we are not used to thinking of mysticism granularly. The result of letting an entire language revive a single occurrence of a word in context is to reveal the utterly specific force of that word in that context, and so there can be no blurring. It is the granular entirety of the language that gives a precise trajectory to each granular occurrence of the word. There can be no blurring. Cavell will say that it requires something like a linguistic form of pitch. On that topic, in an interview, he remarked concerning Emerson's powerful sentences:

That they are each of them a universe entails for me the investigation of the language to which this sentence is native. It could be any language, but the web that produces this sentence can only be investigated by perfect pitch. That's my fantasy; that's the myth of writing for me. Well, I mean, Frege says—and Wittgenstein quotes Frege—you can only understand a sentence in the context of a language. Well, I say, what language? What's a sentence and what's a language?⁵²

And when writing heroically we must, with perfect pitch, trust our words to the specific computations which they have enjoyed in all the contexts in which they have appeared or into which they might be projected. The result is that when our words arrive at the tips of our fingers, they will be perfectly next to what they concern: each word in a given sentence meaning one utterly specific thing.

50. Cavell, *The New Yet Unapproachable America*, 81.

51. Cavell, *The Senses of Walden*, 34-35.

52. Cavell, “An Apology for Skepticism,” in *The American Philosopher: Conversations with Quine, Davidson, Putnam, Nozick, Danto, Rorty, Cavell, MacIntyre, Kuhn*, ed. Giovanna Borradori, trans. Rosanna Crocitto (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1994), 133. In *Philosophical Investigations*, §49, Wittgenstein reports Frege more accurately as saying that a word has meaning only in the context of a sentence.

To write standing face to face to fact, as it were a scimitar whose sweet edge divides you, is to seek not a style of writing but a justness of it, its happy injuries ecstasies of exactness. The writer's sentences must at each point come to an edge.⁵³

Now at last our two will be the real two, our four the real four. And in heroic writing, as with Cavell's own writing, "paraphrase is difficult, and the prose is so closely woven that it is hard to disengage a sentence or a paragraph from its context for purposes of quotation."⁵⁴ Ordinary Language Philosophy is underwritten by perfect pitch, the granular mysticism of Emerson and Thoreau. Each word, each thing, one to another, perfectly, next.

3. Liquid Mysticism in Whitman

The voice which carries us through the 1855 *Leaves of Grass* is not the voice of quiet desperation, or even disquietude, and so these leaves will not at first seem to be addressed to the existential concerns that motivated Emerson and Thoreau and Wittgenstein and even (momentarily) Austin. The voice in those leaves is a voice of continuous joy: "Each moment and whatever happens thrills me with joy."⁵⁵ This does not mean that, unlike *Walden*, these leaves are not addressed to poor students or to those who are said to live in Brooklyn. The way to reconcile these two aspects, continuous joy and a concern with those living lives of quiet desperation, is to think of these leaves on the model of Part IV of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. In Part IV of that book, Zarathustra is interested in talking to those not yet joyful, he is concerned about a cry of distress that he hears on his mountain. But he uses his own happiness as honeyed bait to lure those in distress up to his level:

my happiness itself shall I cast out into all expanses and distances, between sunrise, midday, and sunset, to see whether many human-fishes will not learn

53. Cavell, *The Senses of Walden*, 44.

54. Mary Mothersill, "Review [of Cavell, *Must We Mean What We Say?* & *The World Viewed* & *The Senses of Walden*]," *The Journal of Philosophy* 72, no. 2 (1975): 41.

55. Whitman, *Leaves of Grass*, 40.

to wriggle and tug at my happiness.

Until, biting on my sharp and well-hidden hooks, they must come up to *my* height, the most colorful abyss-groundlings to the most wicked among all human-fish catchers.⁵⁶

So perhaps we can receive these leaves as being in the same existential business as Emerson's essays and Thoreau's pond.

But even apart from their joyful exuberance, these leaves set out on a very different foot, a metaphysical foot, a non-Kantian, non-Austinian, non-Wittgensteinian foot. The work of redemption provided by Whitman is not formal it is metaphysical. This makes it an odd match for "What *we* do is to bring words back from their metaphysical to their everyday use."⁵⁷ But the truth is that metaphysics was the word I used, for Whitman himself: "A morning-glory at my window satisfies me more than the metaphysics of books."⁵⁸ And yet listen briefly to the opening sentence of the first of these leaves:

I celebrate myself,
And what I assume you shall assume,
For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you.⁵⁹

"Every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you" could almost be the plain truth of today's science, although we might have to drop beneath the level of what is today called the atom to preserve its truth. But even if these atoms were more Democritean, than Schrodingerian, that would smell like the metaphysics of books, which however satisfying, will not satisfy as much as a blooming morning-glory. Nevertheless all these equally available atoms have a tendency to dull the sharp scimitar edges dividing this from that. Again if what I assume into myself, you assume into yourself, we may have difficulty keeping ourselves perfectly separate. So when he leads off, "I celebrate

56. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, trans. Graham Parkes (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 208.

57. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, §116.

58. Whitman, *Leaves of Grass*, 40.

59. *Ibid.*, 21. The appearance of "atom" in this exuberant poem sometimes puts me in mind of Lucretius.

myself,” he may be celebrating more than himself. Something like a metaphysical togetherness of all things, perhaps even a democracy of things.

In the word “celebration” itself, I find a joyful welcoming that I do not hear in the expression “self-reliance” which seems more serious business, as if *self-reliance* counts on subtraction whereas *celebration*, especially celebration of a self which assumes what you shall assume, counts on addition. Are we catching a glimpse, here, of a different mysticism, not granular, precise, and perfect, but liquid, merged, and beautiful. Pierre Hadot, in turning from Plotinus, felt that “in the face of this mysticism of cutting away, there was room for a mysticism of welcoming.”⁶⁰ Although there are aspects of mystical welcomings both in Emerson and in Thoreau, I mean only to contrast *Cavell's* Thoreauvian granular mysticism of the perfectly next with what I will call Whitman’s liquid mysticism of the beautiful merge. But what is the merge?

One presupposition of the merge is loafing, abandoning goals. The merge is unavailable to those at work, I almost want to say that it is not available to those who are serious, though I don’t mean by that to require the comic or the joking, only perhaps lightness: the opposite of *gravitas*. Zarathustra reports: “And when I saw my Devil I found him serious, thorough, deep, and solemn: it was the Spirit of Heaviness.”⁶¹ The merge depends on a certain lightness, being at ease, relaxing the will, the mind, the body. Its tempo, Andante.

Loaf with me on the grass [...] loose the stop from your throat,
Not words, not music or rhyme I want [...] not custom or lecture, not even the
best,
Only the lull I like, the hum of your valved voice.⁶²

He writes as if the granular definitions, the limitations, of words, music, or rhyme would be too far from genuine loafing to make the merge possible. He likes the hum

60. Pierre Hadot, *The Present Alone Is Our Happiness: Conversations with Jeannie Carlier and Arnold I. Davidson*. (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2011), 82. Emerson had used a passage from Plotinus as the motto of his 1836 edition of *Nature*. Emerson, *Essays and Lectures*, 1139.

61. Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, 36. This distinction between the light and the heavy may live on in Deleuze’s distinction between humor and irony in his *The Logic of Sense*, ed. Constantin V. Boundas, trans. Mark Lester with Charles Stivale (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990), 9: “Humor is the art the surface, which is opposed to the old irony, the art of depths and heights.”

62. Whitman, *Leaves of Grass*, 23.

of the voice undefined by words, music, or rhyme. He wants the throat uncorked, the open string, unstopped, Thoreau might have said Aeolian music.⁶³ Whitman's well know passage continues:

I mind how we lay in June, such a transparent summer morning;
 You settled your head athwart my hips and gently turned over upon me,
 And parted the shirt from my bosom-bone, and plunged your tongue to my bare-
 restript heart,
 And reached till you felt my beard, and reached till you held my feet.

It seems a languid erotic scene, and so it delightfully is, but it is also a characterization of overcoming or releasing the instrumental seriousness of our lives, bringing a stray stick so close to your face that you begin floating down the grain, swirling around rising bumps along its skin, until just to call it a stick would risk caging its quiet wildness. And there we are, each one to the other, becoming assumed. Whitman continues:

Swiftly arose and spread around me the peace and joy and knowledge that pass
 all the art and argument of the earth;
 And I know that the hand of God is the elderhand of my own,
 And I know that the spirit of God is the eldest brother of my own,
 And that all the men ever born are also my brothers . . . and the women my sisters
 and lovers,
 And that a kelson of creation is love;
 And limitless are leaves stiff or drooping in the fields,
 And brown ants in the little wells beneath them,
 And mossy scabs of the wormfence, and heaped stones, and elder mullen and
 pokeweed.⁶⁴

Limitlessness is everywhere, and this is not unrelated to love, creation's guide, because love too, exceeds what limits or defines us. And so it should not surprise us that

63. Thoreau, *Walden*, 304.

64. Whitman, *Leaves of Grass*, 24.

this limitless peace and joy would exceed all art and argument, all technique whether those of a sailor or a seamstress or a scientist. Neither should it surprise us that this joy, this peace, includes also an aspect of knowledge that exceeds argument, for this passage comes hard on the heels of the eroticism of the preceding lines, and this may put us in mind of knowledge as a form of sexual intimacy. But, again letting sexuality be one aspect of something more comprehensive, there are occasions when we can feel known by another, so totally known as to exceed conceptual limitation.

Remember that Cavell told us one of the features of language that heroic writing must be perfectly responsible to, and perhaps for, is that “every mark of a language means something in the language, one thing rather than another.”⁶⁵ This goal will be rather overcome by the limitlessnesses we have just felt. Indeed, the very next sentence of these leaves is this:

A child said, What is the grass? fetching it to me with full hands;
How could I answer the child [...] I do not know what it is any more than he.⁶⁶

Love, the kelson of creation, of the “procreant urge of the world,” seems to push against there being something that grass is and not another thing.⁶⁷ If you were looking for limitations, for each word *meaning* this rather than that, for each thing *being* this rather than that, then the experiences we have just been through might make you fearful of those experiences, as though they would lead you away from where, in your, businesslike way, you intended to heading. These experiences then seem to be opposite of a kelson, or any way a keel. That is one of the forces which I sense in the line I took as this paper’s motto: “Who need be afraid of the merge?”⁶⁸

And it is that fear of the merge which may help explain why Whitman appears so infrequently in Cavell's transcendentalist underwriting of ordinary language philosophy. He doesn't appear because he wouldn't help.

It's not that there is no answer to the child's question—“What is the grass?”—even in these leaves themselves, it is rather that there are too many answers. The lea-

65. Cavell, *The Senses of Walden*, 34.

66. Whitman, *Leaves of Grass*, 24.

67. *Ibid.*, 22.

68. *Ibid.*, 26.

ves include these answers: the grass is “the flag of my disposition,” “the handkerchief of the Lord,” “itself a child,” “a uniform hieroglyphic,” “the uncut hair of graves.”⁶⁹ Each of these are aspects of the grass. How many aspects does it have? These leaves lean towards the answer: limitless. This seems no way to answer the demands of underwriting of ordinary language philosophy, and once again Whitman won’t appear often because he won’t help much.

But I don’t think all is settled with the transcendentalist underwriting as it stands. Let’s remind ourselves of some old ground. Every word they say chagrined us because they were using those words automatically, unthinkingly, irresponsibly. It broke our hearts. Cavell’s granular mysticism underwrites ordinary language philosophy because it “registers within the writing of the word the entire language from which a word is woven.”⁷⁰ The difficulty with this answer is that it remains algebraic, although it is a corporeal algebra. What is a corporeal algebra? In a certain sense, every practical routine is an algebra, from shucking oysters to changing the oil in your car, from proving theorems in a logical system to ordinary linguistic exchange. In each case we break down the process of, for instance oyster shucking, into more manageable units, and there are some who become so skilled at shucking that they are scarcely conscious of what they are doing with the oysters. Games are algebraic and so too are language-games, corporeal algebras, and so language-games are also prone to becoming deadened as routine. The fact that these routines are corporeal is part of their being on the rough ground, but the rough ground won’t protect our lives from stultifying, as routines stultify. The massive contextual sensitivity of the entire language from which each word in its place is woven is itself a corporeal algebra, and so there can be no even momentary escape from conformalism. To inhabit an algebra is to conform to that algebra. How can the merge help?

Especially how can the merge help if, in the wake of the merge we are unable to answer the child’s question: What is the grass? Our first clue is that there was joy or wonder in all the various answers to that question, those various aspects of grass that tumbled down the page. After the merge, the grass was not less, it was more. That is because the merge is only half the story. The other half is the outlet. As

69. Whitman, *Leaves of Grass*, 24.

70. Cavell, *The Senses of Walden*, 104.

everything plunges in together, so everything emerges from the merge. The last line of the last leaf is part of the merge and the outlet: “Sure as the stars return again after they merge in the light, death is as great as life.”⁷¹ The stars return after they merge: merge and emerge. And when they emerge, they emerge more alive because energized by the merge. Here is a longer passage, three sentences long, merging the wicked and the righteous, all manner of peoples, and then the outlet.

This is the meal pleasantly set [...] this is the meat and drink for natural hunger,
It is for the wicked just the same as the righteous [...] I make appointments
with all,
I will not have a single person slighted or left away,
The keptwoman and sponger and thief are hereby invited [...] the heavy-lipped
slave is invited [...] the venerealee is invited,
There shall be no difference between them and the rest.

This is the press of the bashful hand [...] this is the float and odor of hair,
This is the touch of my lips to yours [...] this is the murmur of yearning.
This is the far-off depth and height reflecting my own face,
This is the thoughtful merge of myself and the outlet again.⁷²

The merge is mystical. It is not the mystical feeling of the world as a limited whole, as it was in the *Tractatus*: not how it is but that it is. Nor is the merge the granular mysticism of Cavell’s Thoreauvian underwriting, a scimitar slicing, each occasion of each word perfectly next to what it concerns, a transcendental deduction of every word in our language. I imagine the *Tractarian* mystical as an all at once confrontation of the logic of language in general with the world as a limited whole, and Cavell’s granular mysticism as a one by one confrontation of each word with its hyper-specific semantic power. The merge is neither of these things. The merge is a liquid mysticism, it may even be near to “what the inexperienced may imagine as the claim to the union or absorption in nature.”⁷³ But it is not only a centripetal merging, it is a centrifugal

71. Whitman, *Leaves of Grass*, 113.

72. *Ibid.*, 34.

73. Cavell, *The Senses of Walden*, 105-6.

outlet. And as after meditation, one returns more alive; so too the outlet brings life to words and to things.

In the outlet things do not emerge utterly specific, not anyway if this means single and separate, but as singular aspects of the merge, retaining all the energy and life, all the joy and wonder of the merge, and feeling that joy and wonder in every creature, in every thing, in every word, in every meaningless sound.

The wild gander leads his flock through the cool night,
Ya-honk! he says, and sounds it down to me like an invitation;
The pert may suppose it meaningless, but I listen closer,
I find its purpose and place up there toward the November sky.⁷⁴

The power of the merge is the power of the sub-conceptual to redeem the the conceptual. If we listen closer. Perhaps the pert are afraid of the merge. “Have you reckoned the landscape took substance and form that it might be painted in a picture? [...] Or the brown land and the blue sea for maps and charts?”⁷⁵ Listen closer. Although maps and charts are eminently useful, there is more to the brown land and the blue sea than appears in any chart, or any collection of charts. The merge redeems.

There is something that comes home to one now and perpetually,
It is not what is printed or preached or discussed [...] it eludes discussion and
print,
It is not to be put in a book [...] it is not in this book,
It is for you whoever you are [...] it is no farther from you than your hearing
and sight are from you.
It is hinted by nearest and commonest and readiest [...] it is not them, though
it is endlessly provoked by them [...] What is there ready and near you
now?⁷⁶

Cavell, like Wittgenstein, is disinclined to take this metaphysical path. It places them both at the heart of the anti-metaphysics of the 20th century. The path Cavell's gra-

74. Whitman, *Leaves of Grass*, 29.

75. *Ibid.*, 72.

76. *Ibid.*, 71.

nular mysticism takes redeems language by means of language: “it is through words that words are to be overcome.”⁷⁷ It is a richer conception than the calculus conception of language because it is not just a linguistic algebra, it is a corporeal algebra, sensitive to all the rich contextual dependencies of the entire language. But it remains algebraic and so it remains formal, essentially a form of conformalism. Whitman’s merge and outlet, is anti-formal, so it is anti-conformal, and unlike Cavell’s Thoreau, words are not enough, it takes more than words to redeem our words. It takes the merge. It takes the merge and the outlet.

There are traditional metaphysicians who imagine the real existing elsewhere, away from us, but this is not Whitman’s merge. The things of this world, the words of our language are not fallen or vile, they are only partial. There is nothing behind them or beneath them. There is only more than them. Conformism is not to be overcome by discovering a more total and more systematic form, a more total and more systematic corporeal algebra. Redemption won’t come from a partiality, however rough the ground, however totally systematic the language. Rather, each thing, each word, each creature, each sensual touch, is redeemed emerging from the merge.

It is in this way that Whitman’s merge underwrites what Cavell takes to be the transcendentalist underwriting of the procedures of Austin and Wittgenstein. If that is so, we can begin to ask what it is about Cavell’s philosophical carriage that made this so difficult to see. Cavell was always interested in meaning what we say, bringing our meaning and our words together with perfect precision. In his book on *Walden* this appears as the ideal of heroic writing. It is something that reminds him of perfect pitch, the perfect matching of sound and speech: that is F# an octave above middle C. The ideal is of a subject speaking and the things said, what is meant and what is said, synchronized perfectly, if only for a moment. It is a representational dream, as difficult to enjoy, and as rare, as perfect pitch. It is a dream of perfect fit, you could even call it a kind of perfectionism. Whitman’s is not a representational dream: “Have you reckoned the landscape took substance and form that it might be painted in a picture?”⁷⁸ If the merge is rare, it is because we are afraid of the merge. Although Whitman

77. Cavell, *The Senses of Walden*, 44.

78. Whitman, *Leaves of Grass*, 72.

can speak of perfection, his is an ideal of beauty, of beauty everywhere in everything, already, even now. “Draw nigh and commence.”^{79, 80}

79. Whitman, *Leaves of Grass*, 109.

80. Thanks to Brett Topey for regular encouragement and to Danica Palacio for an outdoor afternoon which brought me to see the critical importance of listening and the outlet for my reading of *Leaves of Grass*.