From Private to Public
[a review essay of Andrew Norris's *Becoming Who We Are: Politics and Practical Philosophy in the Work of Stanley Cavell*]

AMIR KHAN

The most impressive thing about Andrew Norris' book is its unflinching and unequivocal ease in bringing us to what I have elsewhere called the "Cavellian precipice" through ordinary language philosophy and "external world" skepticism exclusively. That is, this book has a remarkable and fluid grasp of Cavell's contribution to formal philosophical thought, which literary sorts like myself often eschew explaining precisely because the path to explaining skepticism, for us, *feels* far more pregnant and urgent when discussing objects of pleasure, namely film and literature.

Furthermore, to those not well-versed in upper level graduate training in and around the formal parameters of academic philosophy (and even amongst some who are), this book lays out very clearly Cavell's formal achievements within his chosen discipline. By the end of the second chapter, Norris has sealed Cavell's reputation as a post-Kantian philosopher of the highest magnitude, second perhaps only to Wittgenstein.

How does the book do this? First by largely forgoing any discussion of Cavell's work on literature and film to focus instead on Cavell's well-wrought treatment of an intellectual trope called *skepticism*—and patently not of the "other-minds" variety, which literary admirers of Cavell are perhaps primed to understand is of far *more* importance because surely Cavell's lessons have more to do with our treatment and reception of other *people* than other *things*. This is something philosophers just don't get.

But Andrew Norris does; and the Cavellian path he treads to get to the philosopher's denial of the other comes via Cavell's heroes of philosophy first and foremost. Austin, Wittgenstein, and Heidegger are Cavell's true luminaries here, and less so Cukor, Capra, or Coleridge. Thoreau and Emerson also figure, but as philosophers above all—in line, surely, with what Cavell wants of both Thoreau and Emerson.

So what does it mean to be "post-Kantian" (85) exactly? The shift in thinking is away from an understanding of the existence of the external world as a matter of *knowledge*—as something one can know with certainty. To those familiar with Cavell's work, this sounds banally obvious. Let us bypass the idea that we cannot know for certain that the external world exists (through all manner of intellectual parables that many of us are familiar with—the simplest being that when we "see" a chair, we do not see all of it, i.e. not the back of it, hence we cannot be sure that the chair really exists in its totality). The Kantian knee-jerk concession is indeed to accept that human beings are restricted to an understanding of a world of appearances (the phenomenal world). The noumenal world, the "world-in-itself" is beyond our grasp. Surely this proposition *is* something we can know and assert with certainty—the beginnings, say, of a metaphysics. Hence, we can say with confidence: "The world does not exist," or, "We have no way of knowing that the world exists." Yet the reason even these utterances fail is because of the appeal to knowledge, as in "we have no way of *knowing*." Why ought the world's existence (or non-existence) to be a matter of knowing or knowledge at all? This is the primary philosophical mistake that characterizes the Kantian philosopher. Wittgenstein's (and through him Cavell's) achievement is the ability to understand that the world's existence cannot be construed as a matter of knowledge in either case. We cannot *know* that the world exists; equally, we cannot *know* that the world does not exist.

So does the world exist or doesn't it? This sounds like some cruel philosopher's joke, but the ability to bring this intuition to bear is what marks the Wittgensteinian event in Western letters. To borrow a quotation from Norris borrowing from Cavell:

> Wittgenstein's originality lies in having developed modes of criticism that are not moralistic, that is, that do not leave the critic imagining himself free of the faults he sees around him, and which proceed not by trying to argue a given

> statement false or wrong, but by showing that the person making an assertion does not really know what he means, has not really said what he wished. (Cavell qtd. in 44)

Norris adds that "Cavell was one of the first to characterize Wittgenstein as a post-Kantian philosopher, one who seeks to demonstrate the impossibility of metaphysics while shedding light upon our temptation to it" (85).

Thus, to be "post-Kantian" is to resist turning the problem of the existence of the world into a problem of knowledge, which means we understand a) that language cannot describe the world "as it really is," but also, b) that language describes *all there is* that comprises the external world, necessarily real.

Let's take each of these propositions in kind. The difference is in criteria, Austinian versus Wittgensteinian. First, Austin. Here is some of Norris's fine commentary of Austin's importance through a Cavellian lens:

> Austin speaks of "the wile of the metaphysician," which he says consists in asking, "Is it a real table?" without specifying what may be wrong with it, 'so that I feel at a loss 'how to prove' it is a real one" . . . "Will some gentleman kindly satisfy himself that this is a perfectly ordinary hat?" We are left "balled and uneasy: sheepishly we agree that it seems all right, while conscious that we have not the least idea what to guard against." (54)

If someone says to you, "Is this table/hat real?", you could only suspect, at best, that the table/hat is counterfeit somehow, but you would have no way of conceiving how. Your only response would be: "What do you mean?", meaning, in what way could this table/hat possibly be fake? But the skeptic does not mean, "Is this table/hat fake?"; the skeptic means, "Does this table/hat exist?" and hence, "Does the world exist?"

Yet no one, in the everyday use of language, would even "go there," or take the skeptic to mean what he does. Yet the skeptic takes a moralistic stance—in a sense chiding his or her interlocutor for not knowing or questioning whether the world at large exists as if this is the interlocutor's philosophical duty to do. This is a Kantian position of strength where the skeptic has taken the inability of someone to answer

the question ("Does this table exist?") as "proof" that one cannot *know* that the world exists.

> The philosopher [i.e. skeptic] might take himself to be in search of contact with the one real world, but Austin suggests that there is no such world . . . Conversely, if the order of the world fell apart in the manner the skeptic imagines it might, we would not conclude that our claims about it were wrong; we simply wouldn't know what to say. (54)

I'll say here as an aside that Cavell very much believes in philosophy as the site of self-examination, of examining what we in everyday speech tend to gloss over or repress. So isn't the charge to ask whether we know that this table, and hence the world, exists, however "moralistic" in tenor, *in line* with the philosophical project of self-examination?

According to Cavell, it isn't. The skeptic's moralistic imperative to chide his or her interlocutor is cover for something the skeptic him or herself does not exactly know but must *accept*: that both the table and the world do in fact exist; but lacking definitive knowledge, *how* can the skeptic accept this? Moreover, *why* would the skeptic *not want* to accept the existence of the table and/or world?

As Norris skillfully makes clear, the *how* is via Heidegger and Dasein. The *why* (i.e. why not want, or why unable to accept?) is Cavell's indelible contribution to Western philosophy.

> [T]he world doesn't generate philosophical questions for Austin; rather, the worldly Austin criticizes philosophy. Hence, what generates philosophical questions is, by and large, not his concern. Austin does not examine how the philosophers whom he attacks for abusing ordinary language come to speak the way they do—and therefore does not have an adequate account for why his own philosophical correction is necessary. (55)

As noted earlier, Wittgenstein's originality and contribution to philosophy is in his ability to make both the ridiculousness of the philosopher's/metaphysician's query

palpable but simultaneously, not to deny that he himself is tempted to ask these questions in such a vein. That is, Wittgenstein is tempted to take language on holiday—to mean when he asks, "Does this table exist?", in effect, "Does the world exist?" But armed only with language that cannot possibly be taken to mean what he wants it to mean, he has, perhaps, hit bedrock. Wittgenstein, like Austin, understands that there is no good reason his interlocutor *ought to* follow his query where he (Wittgenstein) wants it to go. We are at an impasse. Wittgenstein is not inclined to berate his interlocutor from a position of knowledge by fastening onto the idea that the world is beyond our grasp because to presuppose that the world does not exist is to deny that by using language, we are creating a world. But this is precisely the problem. Is language something we are uttering in absentia? Is the world we create via language, like the Matrix, merely a dream world? Why can't Wittgenstein commit to *this*? Why, rather, are he and Cavell suspicious of a metaphysics that *means* to ask precisely this question, however extraordinary?

Construing the problem of the existence of the external world as a problem of knowledge is to impose subject and predicate onto the world—to assume a knowing 'I' distinct from its object of inquiry. But Norris paraphrasing Heidegger reminds us that to question Dasein in this way "is to deny *Da-sein* as such" (68). The picture of the world as accessible only through a single static frame removes the individual from both *being-in* the world and *being in time*, which are two incontestable facts of existence.

> [T]he skeptic's unseen and unseeable "back half" of the object picks out neither a part of the object that is already distinguished from the rest of the object prior to the skeptic's encounter with it, nor a part of the object that will be treated differently from the rest of the object outside of that encounter—as, say, the back of a chair is seen and treated differently from the armrest. In contrast to the back of the chair, the only "back half" that will serve the skeptic's purpose is one that moves with him, as if it were the shadow cast by the object bathed in the light of his eyes [...]. Cavell adds that the [metaphysician] is a spectator who tries to capture in a *single static moment* the object before him. He does not change his relation to the object (in a way that would allow for a

> perception of the passage of time) by walking around the object, observing and appraising it from different perspectives. If he did, the "back half" that he grudgingly comes to acknowledge eludes him would itself constantly be in flux, disappearing and reappearing. (Norris's emphasis 63-64)

Like Austin, Heidegger is also equally uninterested in what prompts us to pose questions about the external world at the expense of Dasein. To do so is simply in error. Yet to Cavell, the temptation to construe the problem of the existence of the external world as a problem of knowledge is not an intellectual stance that can be dismissed but must be "*worked through*" (Norris's emphasis 67).

> For Cavell, [the skeptic's motivation] is an idea, rather a fantasy, of self-effacement: "In philosophizing we come to be dissatisfied with answers which depend on our meaning something by an expression, as though what we meant by it were more or less arbitrary. . . . It is as though we try to get the world to provide answers in a way which is independent of our claiming something to be so." "I must empty out my contribution to words, so that language itself, as if beyond me, exclusively takes over the responsibility for meaning." This is an absolutely central claim of Cavell's, and it should be seen as a much more nuanced account of the suicide to which Heidegger refers. (Cavell qtd. in 69)

Cavell is uncompromising in this regard—to the point not exactly of *forwarding* a philosophy of suicide, but an austere understanding of the metaphysician's quest to remove him/herself from the scene of inquiry (by isolating an atemporal object as clear and distinct from the perceiving and equally atemporal "I"). *For Cavell, true acknowledgment comes via extreme metaphysical despair and feelings of suicide.*

> [W]here Austin treats this as an oversight characteristic of sloppy work that can be dismissed as such, Cavell treats it as a fantasy expressive of "the human drive to transcend itself, make itself inhuman," which is cast both as being incapable of bearing the weight of its responsibilities, its intelligibility, its own self-expression, and of not needing to do so. (Cavell qtd. in 69)

Cavell insists that the lesson of skepticism is in accepting the burden of language to create the world and to create forms of life (thus making the world habitable) but only *after* working through the temptation to "predicate" (79) the world, to study it and the problem of existence as a problem of knowledge. Yet the *acceptance* of the world cannot refute the skeptic, does not establish that the world does exist—or rather, cannot establish its existence on any type of foundation we could call knowledge (i.e. via predication, where the world is subject to external examination or criteria beyond the perceiving subject). In this way, we remain apart from the world; the principal skeptical lesson Cavell would forward is the truth of separateness and "externality" (85). We may be in and of the world; we may exist in being, and being-in-time; Heidegger may have shown the world to be habitable. But since we are not of "divine intellect" (84), we do not create the world as such; indeed, we *receive* it; our sense perceptions are finite. To accept "human finitude" (84) is to accept that the world precedes our existence, that we *receive and respond* to objects and others who remain external to us (we live our skepticism everyday). Such receptivity in fact *tempts us* into believing that the universe *surely* existed before our arrival, before our perception of it. Hence tempts us into believing an objective universe is real beyond our sense perception of it. But how to access it?

Yet to ask how in this way is precisely the metaphysician's trick because there is no world-in-itself to access. The reason we are not only tempted but willing to entertain metaphysics at all is because we want to deny that we are indeed *of this world in a moral and ethical way*—that is, *responsible* for its being. And the reason *this* is so difficult to accept, the reason we hide from and disown this knowledge is because if there is no "objective" basis to our understanding of the world—i.e., no objective criteria attesting to why language functions at all, then language operates more fundamentally as a Wittgensteinian form-of-life. Language is characteristic not of our utterances obediently (objectively) expressing our wills and desires, but perhaps more poignantly, our always already compromised wills and desires as members of a human community. That is, for language and hence the world *to work, to exist, to be,* requires mutual attunement to one another that cannot be ratified against things in the external world.

The concept of a "King" in chess only signifies what it does if we are in attunement not only about the individual chess piece, but about the makeup of the entire chessboard; in this way, for a single piece to *exist* requires attunement on the rules and conventions of an entire game, here metonymic for a "form of life." Language and the world "work" or "carry on" by no more than the agreements, conventions and forms of life that we commit to in too many ways to count or establish at the outset. The stakes may be rather small, the path to attunement rather easy for something like chess (a game), but when we start examining the nature and the effectiveness of our utterances governing our collective lives together (for example, what constitutes pain, or forgiveness), we are necessarily moving toward the political and easy answers are not so forthcoming.

In this way, that language works at all is an astonishing miracle, one that we must needs continually remind ourselves of especially in face of the ever present possibility that language will break down, that we will fall out of attunement with one another, which means we are always able to reach a point where even our compromised wills and desires to one another become incommunicable. This picture of language is one of frightening contingency which readily exposes our *vulnerability*. For reasons perhaps of self-preservation, we avoid acknowledging or accepting that our attunements to one another, our ability to speak the world and to each other, rest on everyday and ordinary acts of both exposure and acknowledgment. Lacking interlocutors willing either to expose themselves or acknowledge others, the world indeed as we know it breaks down and we fall into "intellectual tragedy" (81) where I am left feeling that chaos, violence, and suffering are the result of being unable to properly bear "responsibility for what I say, and how I say it" (80). This knowledge of skepticism and human finitude (in Cavellian register) is unbearable. Tragedy in the strongest sense is the dramatic rendering of this breakdown in language, this loss of attunement.

But can *speaking for oneself*, meaning what one says to the strongest extent possible, examining how or in what ways we *are* attuned to one another (via either formal Austinian query, or under more organic Wittgensteinian parameters, or both) really *prevent* such breakdown? This is the key question that Norris seeks to tackle in

the remaining chapters of his book. For Norris, only by posing this question in this way can Cavell's philosophy be mined for its political significance.

Chapter 3 acts as an effective bridge. That is, thus far, skepticism is a problem that plagues the individual. In what way does it affect the polis, or a political community? If skepticism can ultimately be construed as an individual's quest to examine one's speech to mean what one says, how does the nature of such inquiry cross the Rubicon towards collective expression, or meaning what one says *altogether*? The answer, at least to me, is not at all obvious though Norris makes it clear that skepticism's route to shared political expression comes via Rousseau's social contract. Key to Cavell's reprise of Rousseau is not that such a contract is discoverable on the barks of trees, but "to understand ourselves as possessing a general will" (106) at all. Here is precisely where every word of Cavell's fellow Americans chagrins him—i.e., in their failure to understand the idea of what might constitute a general will in the first place.

> On Cavell's account, American political culture is (today as then) characterized by a false understanding of its *own* values, values such as individuality, publicity, community, freedom, and deliberation. [Cavell] finds an important corrective to this in the Rousseauian tradition, a tradition that for him culminates with the Romanticism of the American transcendentalists. The American neglect of the transcendentalists is in turn of a piece with American culture's misunderstanding of itself, its failure to realize itself. (Norris's emphasis 100-101)

Americans have a false understanding of freedom, i.e., *individuals doing what they like* as constitutive of a successfully implemented social contract, where no imposition of collective values impinges on an individual's right to pursue his/her worldly desires. In mainstream American parlance, collective interests are given political voice via "factions," or political interest groups (i.e., lobbies); a minimal social contract seeks to mediate amongst a plethora of competing interests. The general will is forged not out of communal agreement and discussion, but cut-throat competition. Norris astutely highlights a truncated version of Madison's *Federalist 10*, which seems to endorse this internecine manner of achieving the general will. Madison defines a "fac-

tion as 'a number of citizens, whether amounting to a majority or a minority of the whole, who are united and actuated by some common impulse of passion or interest'" (Madison qtd. in 103). Yet for positivistic political scientists who simply (objectively) take the existence of such factions for granted, they are liable to conveniently leave out the remainder of the definition, which reads "adverse to the rights of other citizens, or to the permanent and aggregate interests of the community" (Madison qtd. in 103). That is, for positivist economists and commentators like "[Joseph] Shumpeter, [David] Truman, [Friedrich] Hayek, and [Milton] Friedman" (137), the philosophical question of what constitutes the "general will" is never addressed. All citizens have the right and freedom to pursue their own impulsive passions. Yet this short-sightedness does not prevent collective tyranny and domination. Rather, the general will expressed as an aggregate of individual freedoms *exacerbates* brute force and domination. In sotto voce, Cavell and even Norris's picture of America is not of a functional democratic polis, but (then as now) of a tyrannical and even suicidal regime. In short, the hostility towards any social goal of transforming desire (expressed with particular viciousness by the "classical Liberals" (103)) is itself a form of tyranny. "On their account, the impartiality of science is matched by that of the market, which like science tames and controls the irrationality of desire without in any way transforming it" (104). Yet it is precisely the transformation of oneself and one's desires that constitutes the moral life and *true freedom* within the polis. To preclude the possibility of such transformation is a fundamental misunderstanding of "freedom" and a reversal of what the general will should be, turning America monstrous.

> Lacking any ability to structure his life and his commitments [i.e. his desires], the childlike democrat has freedom without being able to develop the character that might allow him to use and order it. In Socrates's typological history of regimes, this utter lack of structure in the end leads to a demand for order *of any sort*, and therefore to tyranny, which supplies just that. In a deeper sense, tyranny is the truth of this mode of democratic freedom, as it is only the tyrant who can truly indulge each of his passing fancies. (Norris's emphasis 107)

In the classical liberal conception, what is meted out as the general will is the agglomeration of "little tyrants," those who think nothing of the general welfare and only of their passing fancies. Moreover, such tyranny is socially contagious as one's ability to satisfy one's desires becomes a mark of "success" to be mimicked:

> It is a measure of Rousseau's genius as a social critic that he perceives that, given our need for the support and approval of others in a modern society of public display and conversation, what we take to be our immediate desires are equally likely to express our ideas of what those around us want and expect—desires that are, in a bitter irony, themselves subject to the same *alienation*. Modern society is a hall of mirrors in which each looks to the others to tell him what he wants and who he is. (My emphasis 108)

What Rousseau is describing is a political state-of-affairs that pre-empts what Thoreau and Emerson will respectively call "quiet desperation" and "silent melancholy," and Norris spends his last two chapters detailing the American transcendentalist response to this modernist alienation. And what Norris will try to show explicitly through Cavell is that the nature of both Thoreau and Emerson's responses, however seemingly rooted in aesthetic individualism, is a challenge and provocation that extends to the polis, hence is the beginning of an indigenous American philosophy that has been largely ignored—certainly by America's mainstream political philosophers.

> Cavell might make the claims he does when we consider the kind of danger posed to democracy by alienation, and the extent to which Emerson and Thoreau are concerned with that danger [...]. Only in democracy, where the people rule, are the people as a whole allowed and indeed called upon to actively participate in public life [...]. [T]his [...] makes Schumpeter's (and so much of contemporary America's) "definition" of democracy as the consent of the governed to the process of selection of their "leaders" so astonishing and disturbing. (142-43)

That is, public life in America simply extends over which "leader" will do the most for an individual's interests. Leaders are called upon to corral and tame a plethora of competing desires but, of course, never to provoke or change the desires of their countrymen/women at all. Yet the goal of provocation is not simply to cling to one's conceptions and interests in face of an adversary, but to pose them in public to see if one's interests are in any way compatible with what the general will might be. If not, perhaps one can be made to alter or change one's individual's interests for the sake of the greater good. Yet the hope for this sort of transformation is wholly lacking in the American political system.

But how is Thoreau's example any better? Retiring to Walden seems less a political act and more a spiritual one. Yet run analogous to the conversation of skepticism and knowledge that makes up the first half of the book, the act of retiring is an initiation of *acceptance* rather than a forwarding of political *knowledge*.

> Understanding Thoreau's efforts [...] as a contribution to philosophy is difficult for many in the world of academic philosophy [...]. The main problem arises, as Cavell notes, from the fact that Thoreau's text lacks what many consider the *sine qua non* of philosophy, *arguments*. (Norris's emphasis 166)

The rational or syllogistic forwarding of more political knowledge is not what America needs; rather, America requires the self-examination necessary to speak for itself, to exit the hall of mirrors, to claim its independence.

> As Cavell puts it, "America's revolution never happened. The colonists fought a war against England all right, and they won it. But it was not a war of independence that was won, because we are not free; nor was even secession the outcome, because we have not departed from the conditions England lives under, either in our literature or in our political and economic lives." (Cavell qtd. in 162)

Thoreau, for instance, tends the bean fields at Walden to discover if doing so has any purchase for him, and what that purchase may be.

> Thoreau depicts himself [...] in his account of raising beans, at the beginning of which he announces that he planted beans for money, and at the end of which he and the reader both recognize money to be the least of his purposes. (162)

Why raise beans at all? The reason is less at issue than the ability to question one's motives in the first place. Thoreau again does not provide an answer but acts as someone who has searched out an answer sincerely, not by actively going through the annals of great books of literature, but by being open and receptive to Walden—that is, by reading Walden in a way and allowing himself to be read by it. These aspirations are as true of *Walden*; the goal of the book is for you to read it and be read by it, which is not an invitation to esoteric philosophical knowledge but to a type of receptive, passive, self-examination. *Walden* is not a philosophical exercise aimed at no one (the solitary working out of a problem of knowledge); rather, *Walden* is aimed at waking up the neighbours.

> [A neighbour] had rated it as a gain coming to America, that here you could get tea, and coffee, and meat every day. But the only true America is that country where you are at liberty to pursue such a mode of life as may enable you to do without these, and where the state does not compel you to sustain the slavery and war and other superfluous expenses which directly or indirectly result from the use of such things. (Thoreau qtd. in 162)

Thoreau as philosopher is initiating a post-Kantian move, the sort perhaps more readily taken up by documenting everyday experience rather than via rigorous academic argumentation. The philosophical goal is to prepare the citizenry, one-by-individual-one, to receive knowledge rather than chide them, as the metaphysician so often does, from a Kantian position of perfect knowledge.

Thoreau, then, acts as an Emersonian "exemplar," albeit as one incomplete, always in flux, as one who must remain open to the world not because one is at the moment lacking in knowledge, but because at *any* moment, acknowledgment is only *partial*, always incomplete as human beings are finite. "Just as, in epistemology, one

cannot simply let the words speak for themselves (speak for us), so in the moral or practical life one cannot simply strip oneself of one's partiality" (208). The epistemological concerns raised by Norris in the book's first two chapters come to an Emersonian head in the book's last chapter. *We don't like* that language and the world work based on the contingent nature of mutual acts of acknowledgment and acceptance which threaten to break down at any moment. *We don't like* the lack of any objective guarantee behind our passive reception of the world. Similarly, in the moral and practical realm, if we are somehow launched by an exemplar on the path toward an examination of self, *we don't like* that such examination remains always *partial*, that our conversion remains forever incomplete. Yet this is the piece of Emersonian philosophical knowledge that we must *accept*. This is how Cavell forwards Emersonianism as an acutely political project.

> [A] drawback of the Socratic/Emersonian language of wakefulness and conversion [is] that it can encourage [...] the suggestion that the change required is a complete break with life as it is now lived. As in Saul's conversion on the road to Damascus, one becomes a different person (Paul) or even kind of being: I who was once blind now see, I who once slept am now awake. But, as we have seen, when Emerson uses this language he quickly adds that a *gradual* revolution is required, one that can never, in principle, be completed. Partiality as such is never overcome, only particular instances of it. (Norris's emphasis 207)

Even attunement amongst our closest friends or dearest relatives are never fully realized, never fully complete; hence we are destined to live our skepticism every day, external and separate from others *in our finitude*. The impossibility at ever achieving perfect attunement with any other mirrors the political impossibility of achieving the general will. We are destined not not to have our say within and amongst the political structures of the day (even within those structures better attuned at articulating a general will than the one we find ourselves in currently), but to be constantly frustrated by the political arrogation of voice occurring amongst the polis. Under perfectionist constraints, in what way will the law of the land *ever* by *my* law?

> The disappointment for which Emersonian perfectionism prepares us is not that in which the vote does not go our way, but one in which the *demos* is not there [...]. For democracy to exist, the demos must be able to recognize themselves, to see themselves in action and speech. But this requires a public mode of speech that is all too rarely manifest [...] [H]ope is needed because who we really are—the *demos* [...] is never who we now are. (221)

The hope for America to see past her sins is perhaps the same hope Cordelia has of her father, admirable and requisite on the one hand, foolhardy and preposterous on the other. And my feeling is that for all the work Norris has done here bringing us squarely to the Cavellian precipice, there is simply no way forward.

Remaining in a state of becoming, of in-between nexts, promises not to unleash an individual's earned spiritual stance of transcendence and acceptance of finitude, the diurnal overcoming of voicelessness through ordinary acts of conversion and change, but more likely individual vituperative backlash. This can also be played out, perhaps is playing itself out, in the aggregate on the world stage. America, that is, routinely *lashes out*. Nietzsche says humans thrive within a given horizon. What Cavell forwards instead is an individual and political project of *perpetually shifting horizons* and it remains to be seen whether this is tenable, either psychologically or politically. Cavell himself both brands America as a nation suited to such a philosophical/political project while granting fully that America has always and continues to deny its sages, has itself never been on the perfectionist (Emersonian) path *ever*. What Cavell's political philosophy then amounts to is an apologia for America's sins guised as perfectionist philosophy. Norris is aware of the danger. In the book's final pages, Norris highlights how things might go awry via an open-ended project of never-ending spiritual deferral:

> [Cavell's approach] raises problems of its own. One of the most obvious and pressing is the potential cost of deferral here. If Cavell's is a perfectionism without perfection, how can it produce anything more than [a] frustrating chase after an horizon that endlessly recedes before us? [...] Cavell's perfectionism may evoke [...] Max Weber's grim account of modern life and science as mo-

> ments in a never-ending process [...] [Cavell] shares Weber's sense that modern life requires that one take one's stand without the kind of traditional or systematic support that Aristotle and contemporary communitarians envision. He seeks to transform Weber's nihilistic progression from within, not by imposing a form upon a section of the series from without, but in transforming the way we go on [...]. Accordingly, Cavell emphasizes more than Weber the threat from within—not the threat from war, economic ruin, political disorientation, or social conflict." (216-17)

We register our disappointment with the world of partial or incomplete justice as is by provoking others as an exemplar ourselves (while being open to provocation), but beyond that, neither Cavell nor his political philosophy, as far as I can tell, provide prescriptions for mounting a political opposition or collective struggle, particularly when faced with the threat of war, economic ruin, and social conflict. I understand that Cavell is not exactly in the business of writing political prescriptions. But as it stands, Cavell's political philosophy, rendered lucidly here by Norris in both its complexity and simplicity, is a political philosophy for the privileged. It provides therapy for those living under the constraints of their own perfectionist aspirations to survive the disappointment of the demos without challenging its wrongheadedness via any type of collective solidarity. I am not so sure such therapy is pressing, say at present, particularly when America's continual disappointment in herself results not (and has *never* resulted) in transcendental soul searching at a collective level but the continual wreaking of havoc the world over. The Cavellian political project is a tall order bordering on the farfetched. Note Norris's somewhat compromised optimism that concludes his impressive monograph: "Democracy, on this account, does not accidentally and unfortunately fall into rigidity, thoughtlessness, and conformity; rather, its essence is to convert these. This is hardly a consoling vision. But it is, I think, a heartening one" (222). Can the forces lobbying democracy toward rigidity and thoughtlessness (which could further be thought of as the Fortune 500 companies and their train of knights and squires constantly frustrating the general will) really be *converted* by the woefully outnumbered Emersonians and transcendentalists out there, and not of the self-help, but of the Cavellian variety? One can, indeed, hope.