

9. At the Feet of the Familiar: Thoughts on Cavell on Emerson and Wittgenstein

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I ask not for the great, the remote, the romantic; ... I embrace the common, I explore and sit at the feet of the familiar, the low. Give me insight into to-day, and you may have the antique and future worlds.

R. W. EMERSON, "The American Scholar"

My first substantive conversation with Stanley concerned Emerson. Having come to his work through my interests in Wittgenstein, ordinary language philosophy, and skepticism, I arrived at Harvard as a graduate student in the mid-1980s hoping to work with him on these kinds of concerns—the concerns that had guided much of my undergraduate studies at Berkeley. Since I had read Part Four of *The Claim of Reason*, I shouldn't have been surprised to find that the center of Stanley's philosophical concerns had shifted somewhat away from Wittgenstein and toward Romanticism (as well as, at that point, Hollywood melodrama). But I was surprised, and that surprise turned to disappointment and distress upon attending the first few meetings of a lecture course on Emerson that he offered early in my time as a student. While I found Stanley's lectures interesting enough, I found Emerson all but entirely unreadable—often impenetrably obscure and, where not, ridiculously musty, pretentious, and overwrought. Since I wasn't generally given to condemning authors I'd only begun to read—the philosophical virtue of the principle of charity had been deeply inculcated in me at Berkeley—I'm certain that my hasty and confident condemnation of Emer-

son was, whatever else, an expression of the kind of dismissiveness toward American philosophical thought that Stanley has diagnosed. Our first substantive conversation, then, consisted in his patiently responding to my embarrassingly uninformed, but firmly expressed, exasperation with Emerson. I can still hear Stanley's voice as he assured me that he knew Emerson could be "hard to take."

Soon enough, though, I not only softened my judgment but came to share Stanley's admiration for Emerson. Partly, this change was produced by the ways in which his use of Emerson to articulate what he called Moral Perfectionism provided a path into Emerson's texts that I felt I could follow. However, it more importantly and more fundamentally turned on realizing that Stanley's approach to Emerson's texts was deeply Wittgensteinian. For me, especially salient points of affinity included the fact that Stanley read Emerson as showing how our language reflects and provides the conditions of our lives (how the terms in which we understand ourselves and our world express and shape our form of life), how our chafing at these conditions drives us to seek freedom in repudiating them and relying on our private power (drives us to try to speak outside language games), how this misdirected quest for freedom traps us in the emptiness of conformity (leaves us captivated by pictures or immobilized on slippery ice), and, to highlight only one further point, how genuine freedom and the recovery of expressive power depend not upon escaping our common language but upon abandoning ourselves to it or settling ourselves more deeply into it (rotating our axis of orientation and returning to the rough ground of our common language).¹

Receiving this especially congenial Wittgensteinian Emerson was, quite literally, a life-changing boon. Not only did Emerson begin to figure prominently in my thinking and teaching (and less prominently in my writing), but thanks to invitations from Russell Goodman to help lead two National Endowment for the Humanities-sponsored programs devoted to Emerson in the summers of 2003 and 2005, it led to my meeting my wife—and that has turned out to be more profoundly, and more hap-

1. This is an important point of contrast between Cavell's (Wittgensteinian) linguistic approach to Emerson and pragmatist linguistic approaches as exemplified in, for example, Richard Poirier's *The Renewal of Literature: Emersonian Reflections*. Whereas Cavell's Emerson sees our captivity as deriving from a repudiation of the common terms/conditions of our lives and finds the path of freedom in deeper resignation to them, Poirier's Emerson finds settled language as such as to be the source of entrapment and locates freedom in playfully rising above settled forms of expression. I've discussed these matters in my "Ascent and Resignation: The Structure of Liberation in Emerson's 'The Poet'" (unpublished).

pily, life-changing than I could have imagined. At the same time, the very congeniality of Stanley's Wittgensteinian approach to Emerson and how productive I found it meant that I was slow to take any critical distance from it—to ask after the alignments that he creates and to consider how deep they reach, what interpretive and philosophical gains they produce, but also what interpretive and philosophical costs they may incur.

In this regard, it's worth noting that Stanley's own account of the alignment he finds between Emerson and Wittgenstein (or, more broadly, between American Transcendentalism and Ordinary Language Philosophy) evolves significantly over the course of his authorship. In his earliest works dealing with ordinary language philosophy and with Thoreau (as represented in *Must We Mean What We Say?* and *The Senses of Walden*), there are clear thematic relationships but Stanley does not himself draw any explicit connections. This changes following *The Claim of Reason*. In *In Quest of the Ordinary*, he tells us that the sense of the ordinary and of its philosophical pertinence that he finds in Wittgenstein and Austin are “underwritten by Emerson and Thoreau in their devotion to the thing they call the common, the familiar, the near, the low.”² As the idea of “underwriting” suggests, this is to say that, at this point, he finds that the work of Emerson and Thoreau provide a kind of security or backing for Wittgensteinian and Austinian appeals to the ordinary. By the time of *This New Yet Unapproachable America*, Stanley has come to articulate the relationship he finds between the Emersonian and Wittgensteinian appeals to the ordinary as a matter of each underwriting the other so that, as he says, neither is “basic.”³ And finally, in his Introduction to *Emerson's Transcendental Etudes* (and so after composing all of his published essays on Emerson), he extends this idea of mutual underwriting by suggesting that he treats the texts of each as a “means of interpreting” the texts of the other.⁴ The texts of each, that is, provide a kind of frame through which to read the texts of the other or, even, a provocation for reading the texts of the other.

2. Cavell, *In Quest of the Ordinary* (Chicago, IL and London: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 4.

3. Cavell, *This New Yet Unapproachable America* (Albuquerque, NM: Living Batch Press, 1989), 77. Something of the extent and character of this sense of mutual underwriting is conveyed by a remark I recall Cavell making in the course of a seminar discussion of one of the essays in *This New Yet Unapproachable America*: he confessed his surprise that, on the occasion of delivering the two lectures that form the main body of the work, he found himself responding to questions about Emerson by invoking Wittgenstein and, likewise, responding to questions about Wittgenstein by turning to Emerson.

4. Cavell, *Emerson's Transcendental Etudes*, ed. David Justin Hodge (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003), 5.

The fact of this evolution suggests that Stanley was less concerned to articulate *the* philosophical relation between Emerson and Wittgenstein than in working within the light he found them to cast on one another. Further, given the obvious productivity of this approach, Stanley wasn't much concerned to dwell upon the equally evident fact that reading one philosopher in the light cast by another can blur or occlude important differences and block our exploration of the differences those differences might make. It has only been recently, in the context of a larger project considering the shift in Stanley's work following *The Claim of Reason* from conceiving of philosophy as a modernist enterprise to conceiving it as a Romantic quest, that I have, for myself, begun to consider these matters. I've begun trying to make clearer for myself what insights into Emerson or Wittgenstein (or language, or skepticism, or perfectionism, etc.) we owe to his alignment of the two as well as what insights, or questions, the alignment might cast into shadow and what yield peering into those shadows may bring.

My approach to these questions has been exploratory; a matter of poking around and tugging on various threads in Stanley's weave of connections between Emerson and Wittgenstein. At this stage, at least, I'm less interested in reaching conclusions than in coming to a better understanding of the complexities of the issues. One of the methods I've found especially helpful consists in juxtaposing passages from Emerson and Wittgenstein and, as it were, speculating on the various harmonies and dissonances I sense. In the bulk of the pages to follow, I'll share one such juxtaposition along with some of my quite preliminary and provisional reflections.

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Consider, then, the following passages in which Emerson and Wittgenstein each emphasize the importance of attending to the familiar. First, a passage from Emerson's early address "The American Scholar"—a passage that forms a central touchstone for Cavell and from which I've taken both my title and my epigraph:

I ask not for the great, the remote, the romantic; what is doing in Italy or Arabia; what is Greek art, or Provençal minstrelsy; I embrace the common, I explore and sit at the feet of the familiar, the low. Give me insight

into to-day, and you may have the antique and future worlds. What would we really know the meaning of? The meal in the firkin; the milk in the pan; the ballad in the street; the news of the boat; the form and gait of the body;—show me the ultimate reason of these matters; show me the sublime presence of the highest spiritual cause lurking, as always it does lurk, in these suburbs and extremities of nature; let me see every trifle bristling with the polarity that ranges it instantly on an eternal law; ... and the world lies no longer a dull miscellany and lumber-room, but has form and order; there is no trifle; there is no puzzle; but one design unites and animates the farthest pinnacle and the lowest trench.⁵

Now put beside that the following passage from early in the so-called the methodological or meta-philosophical sections of Wittgenstein's *Investigations*.

These considerations bring us up to the problem: In what sense is logic something sublime?

For there seemed to pertain to logic a peculiar depth—a universal significance. Logic lay, it seemed, at the bottom of all the sciences. —For logical investigation explores the nature of all things. It seeks to see to the bottom of things and is not meant to concern itself whether what actually happens is this or that. —It takes its rise, not from an interest in the facts of nature, nor from a need to grasp causal connections: but from an urge to understand the basis, or essence, of everything empirical. Not, however, as if to this end we had to hunt out new facts; it is, rather, of the essence of our investigations that we do not seek to learn anything *new* by it. We want to *understand* something that is already in plain view. For *this* is what we seem in some sense not to understand. ... We feel as if we had to *penetrate* phenomena: our investigation, however, is directed not toward phenomena, but, one might say, towards the

5. Ralph Waldo Emerson, "The American Scholar," in *Ralph Waldo Emerson: Essays and Lectures*, (New York: The Library of America, 1983), 68-69.

‘possibilities’ of phenomena. We remind ourselves, that is to say, of the *kinds of statements* that we make about phenomena.⁶

Although I hope that at least some echoes between these passages are clear enough to begin to suggest why I juxtapose them, it will be helpful to make explicit a few especially salient points of connection.

First, although both Emerson and Wittgenstein are seeking to understand something or to gain some kind of insight, each rejects the idea that the understanding they seek will be achieved through new information. Indeed, there is more than a hint of the suggestion that the idea that the understanding we seek depends upon finding something new or something remote is a kind of distraction. It is, they suggest, a way of avoiding attending to what is before us and so of confusing, or replacing, the reflective and laborious task of seeking “understanding” with the more immediate gratifications of adding to our store of data—data that, itself, is precisely what we need to understand. In “Self-Reliance,” Emerson rebukes this tendency toward what we might call high-minded distraction as “roving” and urges that, since “God is here within,” “let us not rove; let us sit at home with the cause.”⁷

Second, both Emerson and Wittgenstein reject the idea that they need to hunt up new facts, penetrate phenomena, or explore remote and far-off lands because what they want to understand is precisely what is right before them—the familiar or what is present and open to view. That, they suggest, is what we somehow fail to understand. Hence, the familiar, ordinary, everyday is both present to us and remote from us or, more accurately, we are both present to it and remote from it. We are, if you like, intimately remote with one another—as close to the ordinary as it’s possible to get, and yet somehow missing it all the same; like estranged neighbors or partners

6. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, 3rd edn., trans. G.E.M. Anscombe (New York: The MacMillan Company, 1968), §§89–90.

7. Ralph Waldo Emerson, “Self-Reliance,” in *Ralph Waldo Emerson: Essays and Lectures*, 272. Compare, in this regard, Nietzsche’s remarks in the opening section of the Preface to the *Genealogy of Morals*: “We are unknown to ourselves, we men of knowledge—and with good reason. We have never sought ourselves—how could it happen that we should *find* ourselves. It has rightly been said: ‘Where your treasure is, there will your heart be also’; *our* treasure is where the beehives of our knowledge are. We are constantly making for them, being by nature winged creatures and honey-gatherers of the spirit; there is one thing alone we really care about from the heart—‘bringing something home.’ Whatever else there is in life, so-called ‘experiences’—which of us has sufficient earnestness for them? Or sufficient time? Present experience has, I’m afraid, always found us ‘absent-minded’: we cannot give our hearts to it—not even our ears!” Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, in *Basic Writings of Nietzsche*, ed. and trans. Walter Kaufman (New York: Random House, 1968), 451.

who can't escape one another's presence but utterly fail to appreciate the life that intrudes upon them.

Third, in directing us toward what it is that we miss in the familiar, both passages invoke forms of a contrast between the deep, the essential, the central or highest, and the surface, apparent, open. Wittgenstein speaks of our wanting to understand the "basis" or "essence" of everything empirical, something that seems to lie beneath the surface so that we "feel as if we had to *penetrate* phenomena." And Emerson employs a contrast between the central, "the highest spiritual cause," and the outlying or peripheral, the "suburbs and extremities of nature." Further, each associates the deep or essential or central with an idea of the sublime. Emerson seeks "the sublime presence of the highest spiritual cause" and Wittgenstein asks after the sense in which logic is sublime.

However, fourth, without rejecting some sense of the sublime, both Emerson and Wittgenstein *contest* the contrast between the deep, essential, central on the one hand and the apparent, surface, peripheral on the other. They suggest instead that we need to come to see the essential *in* the apparent, the essence *in* what lies open to view, the central *in* the peripheral, the sublime *in* the ordinary. The highest spiritual cause, Emerson suggests, is not remote, but "lurking" in "every trifle" of our everyday world. The basis or essence of everything empirical, Wittgenstein suggests, isn't hidden beneath the phenomena but is revealed precisely in the structures of, and relations among, the kinds of statements that we make about phenomena. "*Essence*," he says later in the *Investigations*, "is expressed by grammar."⁸

But within, or across, these points of connection there are also clear differences. Perhaps the most evident difference is in the tone of the writing. But that difference is connected with, and seems to be at least partly generated by, another—by the fact that Wittgenstein is seeking to understand the '*possibilities*' of everyday phenomena while Emerson is seeking insight into their *meaning* or *significance*. We might see this as a difference in the levels at which phenomena are considered.

In seeking to understand the '*possibilities*' of phenomena, Wittgenstein is asking after the criteria that tell what something is and the grammatical relations that control when and how our concepts of those things may be meaningfully employed.

8. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, §371.

Were Wittgenstein to take up Emerson's examples, he would be interested to explain why the ballad isn't "in the street" in the same way the meal is "in the firkin" or the milk is "in the pan."⁹ He would seek the criteria for something's being a boat, as opposed to a ship, a dingy, a toy boat, a raft, or a floating trunk on which you've escaped a sinking ship. He might consider when someone could be said to have been given, or to have received, news of the boat. Have I given my employer the news that her boat has sunk and all aboard are lost if I hand her a report of severe weather, initiate steps to purchase a new boat, or offer her the card of a qualified funeral director? Maybe, maybe not. Wittgenstein will want to understand how the possibilities of these phenomena allow, in different circumstances, for both.

In contrast to Wittgenstein, Emerson takes the identities and possibilities of phenomena for granted, but seeks insight into their meaning or significance.¹⁰ Further, and crucially, he sees the meaning and significance of phenomena as dependent upon their being infused by, and expressive of, a "highest spiritual cause" that binds them all together or ranges them on an eternal law as parts of a coherent, purposive, and ordered totality.¹¹

This difference in the levels at which they are seeking to understand everyday phenomena, in the questions they direct to what is right before us, must, as I suggested, help to create their dramatic differences in tone. In the passage under consideration, Wittgenstein's tone or affect is generally quite flat—although there is a hint of the sense of impotent urgency expressed in the feeling that we have to penetrate phenomena. Often, however, his accounts of our failure to understand possibilities of

9. A "firkin," by the way, is a specific size of cask in the English system of casks. Holding 8 gallons or 30 liters, the firkin is the smallest but one of the English cask units, twice the size of a pin and half the size of a kilderkin. Other such cask units include, in ascending order, the rundlet, the barrel, the tierce, the hogshead, the puncheon, the butt, and the tun. It was a relative of this last that was, unforgettably, celebrated by Melville in the "Great Heidelburgh Tun" chapter of *Moby Dick*.

10. There's an important qualification of this point that should be noted. Emerson holds that we fail to understand the true nature of individual things if we regard them in separation from what we've seen him call the "eternal law" or the "highest spiritual cause," for it is that "eternal law" or "highest spiritual cause" that carries their true nature. This bears comparison with the various levels at which Wittgenstein employs the context principle and with his insistence that it is *in language* that phenomena are to be understood.

11. For Emerson, the highest spiritual cause is always, ultimately, associated with coherence, order, and purpose—albeit with a coherence, order, and purpose that may not be immediately apparent. This is the basis of his conviction that "[t]here will be agreement in whatever variety of actions, so they be each honest and natural in their hour." For, as he continues, "of one will, the actions will be harmonious, however unlike they seem. These varieties are lost sight of at a little distance, at a little height of thought" (Emerson, "Self-Reliance," in *Ralph Waldo Emerson: Essays and Lectures*, 266).

everyday phenomena generate tones of surreal bafflement. Sometimes this surreal bafflement is inflected comically—as when he invites us to “Imagine someone saying: But I know how tall I am!” and laying his hand on top of his head to prove it.”¹² And sometimes it is inflected through desperate rage—as when he tells us that he has seen a person in a discussion of the “privacy of sensations” “... strike himself on the breast and say: ‘But surely another person can’t have THIS pain!’”¹³ Emerson’s tone, by contrast, is full of Romantic longing and hovers on the edge of turning to poetry—“the meal in the firkin; the milk in the pan; the ballad in the street;” Whereas Wittgenstein’s tone speaks most immediately to the prospect of relief from confusion and the satisfaction of finding or recovering our bearings, Emerson’s tone holds out the prospect of a redemptive transfiguration of the ordinary and of the everyday. If the scenes of our everyday lives (perhaps especially in the context of the increasing routine, mechanization, and instrumentality created by an industrializing 19th century America) strike us as a “dull miscellany and lumber-room” of meaningless scraps, Emerson seeks a way of apprehending those very scenes, objects, and events that shows them “bristling” with the form, order, and purpose of the “highest spiritual cause.” With the eyes of this mode of vision, what had seemed trifles are transfigured, imbued with meaning and significance, so that we recognize the sublimity of our ordinary world and that, in truth, “there is no trifle.” (Here we catch sight of Emerson standing behind William Carlos Williams’s red wheelbarrow.)

This brings us to what is, at least apparently, an especially important difference between Emerson and Wittgenstein and also to one of Cavell’s most important moves in interpreting Emerson. The difference concerns the place of the divine or transcendent in the work of each, and Cavell’s interpretive move concerns his construal of Emerson’s invocations of the divine or transcendent.

Although Wittgenstein occasionally mentions God, evidently considered dedicating his *Philosophical Remarks* “To the Glory of God,” remarked that he couldn’t help but see problems from a “religious point of view,” and was manifestly occupied with what we might call the state of his soul, notions of the divine or transcendent do not play any direct or evident role in *Philosophical Investigations* or other of his ma-

12. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, §279.

13. *Ibid.*, §243.

major works. This stands in marked contrast to Emerson. Emerson's intellectual formation was charged by his efforts to defend a metaphysics of divine causality against skeptical assaults, his professional life began as a Unitarian minister, and, most importantly, all of his writing is pervaded by invocations of the divine. As early as "The Divinity School Address," Emerson laments that what he there calls the "doctrine of soul" is no longer taught. "Men have come to speak," he says, "of the revelation as somewhat long ago given and done, as if God were dead." But, he tells his audience of soon-to-be Unitarian ministers, "It is the office of a true teacher to show us that God is, not was; that He speaketh, not spake."¹⁴ This basic idea is unchanged throughout Emerson's authorship and, indeed, this "doctrine of soul" may well be regarded as the central principles animating all of his work.

Obviously, sifting through the strands of this apparent difference, arriving at adequate understandings of the respective views of Emerson and Wittgenstein on these matters, tracing alignments and divergences and assessing their significance, would be an enormous undertaking that I can't even begin to enter into here. However, I do want to consider at least briefly the interpretive move Cavell makes in this regard. In particular, Cavell makes two closely linked interpretive moves that dramatically reduce the distance between Emerson and Wittgenstein on this score. First, he construes Emerson's invocations of the divine (God, the Over-Soul, the One, etc.) as amounting to, or as equivalent to, invocations of the sphere of language. Second, he construes Emerson's claims for our participation in the divine and our sharing in the creative power of the divine as amounting to, or as equivalent to, claims for the power we possess as speakers to all that language opens and enables. In effect, then, Cavell seems to treat Emerson's appeals to God as the basis, cause, and ground of the meaning of everything as equivalent to Wittgenstein's appeals to our shared language and forms of life.

Consider part of pivotal passage from near the center of "Self-Reliance" that seems, among other things, to speak to what Emerson means by the "highest spiritual cause" or the "ultimate reason" animating all things. The passage concerns the nature of what Emerson calls "the aboriginal Self, on which a universal reliance may be grounded," and he tells us that "inquiry into [this aboriginal Self] leads us to that

14. Emerson, "Address," in *Ralph Waldo Emerson: Essays and Lectures*, 83 and 88.

source, at once the essence of genius, of virtue, and of life, which we call Spontaneity or Instinct.” Emerson goes on:

In that deep force, the last fact behind which analysis cannot go, all things find their common origin. For, the sense of being which in calm hours rises, we know not how, in the soul, is not diverse from things, from space, from light, from time, from man, but one with them, and proceeds obviously from the same source whence their life and being also proceed. We share the life by which things exist, and afterwards see them as appearances in nature and forget that we shared their cause. Here is the fountain of action and thought. Here are the lungs of that inspiration which giveth man wisdom, and which cannot be denied without impiety and atheism. We lie in the lap of immense intelligence, which makes us receivers of its truth and organs of its activity.¹⁵

Emerson then begins the following paragraph with remarks that echo these, but use more explicitly theological language. “The relations of the soul to the divine spirit,” he says, “are so pure that it is profane to seek to interpose helps. It must be that when God speaketh he should communicate, not one thing, but all things; should fill the world with his voice; should scatter forth light, nature, time, souls, from the center of thought; and new date and new create the whole.”¹⁶

Speaking of this passage, Cavell says the following:

It is true that when I hear Emerson saying (in “Self-Reliance”), “We lie in the lap of immense intelligence, which makes us receivers of its truth and organs of its activity,” I know that while others will take this “intelligence” to be an allusion to God or to the Over-Soul and a little condescend to it, I take it as an allusion to, or fantasy of, our shared language, and I aspire to descend to it.¹⁷

15. Emerson, “Self-Reliance,” 269.

16. *Ibid.*, 269-70.

17. Cavell, “Finding as Founding: Taking Steps in Emerson’s ‘Experience,’” in *This New Yet Unapproachable America*, 117.

Cavell is surely right in suggesting that some readers of Emerson will be able to conceive no response to allusions to God other than condescension and, against such responses, his counter move of aspiring to descend to a fantasy of our shared language—that is, of seeking to work his way into that fantasy and allowing it to inform his reading—represents a way of taking Emerson fully seriously. However, Cavell’s construal of Emerson’s “lap of immense intelligence” (and other invocations of God) as expressing a fantasy of our shared language may also seem to evade grappling with Emerson’s metaphysics and, in so doing, to represent a failure to take Emerson fully seriously *as Emerson*.

This much, I think, is clear. First, for those of us who wish to find in Emerson not simply a figure of historical interest but a thinker of contemporary philosophical relevance, Cavell’s Wittgensteinian linguistic construal of Emerson’s notations of the pervasive and active presence of God (the One, the divine spirit, etc.) is an obvious and dramatic advance over readings of Emerson that place a great deal of weight on Emerson’s metaphysics but leave that metaphysics fundamentally mysterious—something that is not subject to argument or demonstration but must be felt by “the moral sense” or gleaned through immediate “intuition.”¹⁸ Second, Cavell’s construal of this aspect of Emerson’s thought yields very real fruit. Perhaps most importantly, it allows us to find confirmation of Emerson’s claims for the nature and power of the divine *in the text of his writings itself*. Especially for a writer and reader, it is *in language* that the impersonal power that is the ground of our being and the source of our capacity for thought and action will be encountered most directly and palpably. On this construal of his thought, then, to take Emerson’s remarks about God seriously doesn’t require us to accept anything on faith. We (simply) have to recognize that, and how, his writing itself demonstrates his claims. How, that is, its endlessly astonishing connections, coherencies, and luminous moments of spontaneous “whim” testify to the agency of that “character” that he shows to “speak above our will.”¹⁹

18. A striking recent example of this latter tendency is Joseph Urbas’s *Emerson’s Metaphysics: A Song of Laws and Causes*.

19. Emerson, “Self-Reliance,” 266. See my “Emerson’s Metaphysics,” *Nineteenth-Century Prose* 45, no. 1 (Spring 2018): 109-16.

At the same time, Cavell's move of effectively assimilating or equating talk of God to talk of language raises important questions. Here, I'll simply state two closely related questions that, to my mind, need to be explored more fully.

First, can Cavell's linguistic, secularized construal of Emerson fully account for, and preserve, the sense of sublimity and significance that Emerson celebrates in life being no longer a dull miscellany but infused with the "lurking" presence of "the highest spiritual cause?" Does some part of the sense of the illumination of the ordinary that Emerson celebrates, and invites us to experience, depend on its being also more than ordinary? Seeing the *divine* in the ordinary isn't simply appreciating the natural wonder of the ordinary. The infinity of a text, we might think, is not the same as the infinity of God, and celebrating apparently boundless human possibility isn't the same as celebrating human divinity.

The second question picks up the same issues as the first, but from the other side. I think it's clear that the intimacy of connection that Cavell sees between Emerson and Wittgenstein helps to energize and inform his redemptive reading of Wittgenstein. It helps, that is, to inform the ways in which he finds in Wittgenstein's tales of nonsense, bafflement, and the recovery of sense not only a depth of existential fervor but, more specifically, a continuous, broadly spiritual odyssey from (a kind of) perdition to (a kind of) redemption. This is not to say, of course, that these dimensions of Cavell's reading of Wittgenstein derive solely from the association with Emerson. They were present, at least in embryo, as early as "The Availability of Wittgenstein's Later Philosophy." I wonder, though, whether the close association, if not equivalence, that Cavell's draws between Emerson's divine spirit and Wittgenstein's language might end up reacting back upon his vision of ordinary language and bestowing upon it a kind of halo of the transcendent. If what some might see as the taint of Emerson's metaphysics of divine presence and agency is, in some ways, washed away through the secularizing connection with Wittgenstein's ordinary language, might Cavell's picture of ordinary language, in turn, end up taking on some of that residual aura? Might ordinary language, that is, get colored in shades of the purity, depth, coherence, order, etc., of the divine? Might it become imbued with (some of) the salvific power of the divine even while we also recognize that it allows (but does not provoke?) its own repudiation in metaphysics?

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There's obviously more to be said about all the points I've touched on, but I will leave matters as they stand since my aim hasn't been to reach conclusions but to illustrate how I've begun to explore and assess the weave of connections Stanley draws between Emerson and Wittgenstein as well as how those connections inform his view of each. I confess to some trepidation about making these still developing thoughts public—partly because they *are* still developing. But, I've been helped past my hesitations by recalling a moment from what turned out to be my last philosophically substantive conversation with Stanley—a moment that I take as a kind of encouragement from Stanley himself. So, having begun by recalling my first substantive conversation with Stanley, I'll close by touching on the last.

While visiting Stanley not long after the publication of *Little Did I Know*, we walked from the house to have dinner at the neighborhood Japanese restaurant Stanley liked to frequent. Our conversation throughout the evening centered on *Little Did I Know* and moved more or less seamlessly between reminiscence, reflection on general questions of philosophical autobiography, and talking about some of the text's individual moments or episodes. One of the passages I had wanted to raise with Stanley appears very early and involves his account of a painful incident in which he sees his father humiliate himself. The incident, briefly, is this. While visiting his parents after defending his Ph.D. dissertation, Stanley had left a copy of *Commentary* magazine that he'd been reading on the plane lying on their coffee table. When family friends at the house for dinner were impressed to see the intellectually serious magazine, Stanley's father, in an effort to win standing for sophistication that he lacked, claimed it was his.

What had especially struck me about this episode is the fact that Stanley introduces it by remarking "We see our fathers naked, we men;" for that remark, I thought, was a quite direct allusion to the moment in Genesis, following the flood, when a drunken Noah falls asleep "uncovered in his tent" and his son, Ham, saw "the nakedness of his father and told his two brothers outside."²⁰ Ham is cursed for these acts—for seeing his father's humiliation and for adding to that humiliation by telling

20. Cavell, *Little Did I Know: Excerpts from Memory* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2010), 11 and Genesis, 9:21-22, King James version.

his brothers—while the brothers are blessed because they protected their father’s dignity by turning away their gaze and covering his nakedness. (“And Shem and Japheth took a garment, and laid it upon both their shoulders, and went backward, and covered the nakedness of their father; and their faces were backward, and they saw not their father’s nakedness” (Genesis, 9:23).

This passage in Stanley’s text is clearly, whatever else, a complex moment of Oedipal drama. The son’s triumph in defending his Ph.D. is juxtaposed with (perhaps it provokes?) the father’s humiliating attempt to assert his own intellectual standing and that humiliation, in turn, (perhaps intentionally if not consciously) taints the son’s triumphal return. The complexity is intensified by the fact that Stanley’s telling of this story of seeing his father’s spiritual nakedness immediately precedes his account of the moment, as he puts it, “at which I realized that my father hated me, or perhaps I can more accurately say, wished I did not exist.”²¹ Within this whirl of textual and psychological complexity, I had wanted to ask Stanley about the allusion to Genesis. I wondered whether he was using it to suggest that, in telling this tale of his father’s humiliation, he, even if only retrospectively, earned the curse of his father’s hatred. I also wondered whether he was suggesting that (for him? for sons?) the willingness to take on the curse of the father is necessary—necessary for taking on his own life? for being able to write his autobiography? And if the autobiography is also philosophical, I wondered what Stanley might be suggesting about the place that tales of humiliation and the courting of curses play in philosophy.

At the same time, the obvious painfulness of the incident and the psychological intimacy of the issues in play made me hesitant to raise the matter. In the end, though, and counting on the depth of our friendship, I did raise my questions. My recollection of how exactly I did so is vague—I may simply have said something along the lines of “I’m struck by your allusion to Ham in the early story of your father’s humiliation” and gone on to recall the passages in Stanley’s text and in Genesis. But my recollection of Stanley’s response is absolutely clear and vivid. Initially, Stanley remarked that he hadn’t had the Genesis story in mind in writing of men seeing the nakedness of their fathers. However, as soon as I had said enough to have brought the relevant passages from Genesis clearly to mind, Stanley visibly froze, his head turned

21. Cavell, *Little Did I Know*, 14-15.

slightly to the side, his chin a bit elevated, and his gaze directed toward the distance as he let his thoughts collect. Then, after several long seconds, and in a gesture that was characteristic of Stanley when he had reached some insight or been struck by a realization, he sharply rapped the table with the knuckles of his right hand, turned toward me, and bathing me with one of his unforgettably radiant smiles said “It’s nice to have smart friends.” Following which, we went on to talk for quite some time about all of my various questions and more.

I take encouragement from this recollection, and share the story, because it emblemizes Stanley’s intellectual generosity but also, and especially, his deep joy in seeing his work spur the thought of others. I don’t know what Stanley might say in response to the thoughts I’ve begun to unfold here. I think I do know, though, that he would be glad for the fact of them; happy to see that his work is still provoking me to think. I hope that, initial and provisional as they are, these thoughts too would bring a smile to his face.²²

22. A version of the central section of this essay was presented as part of a colloquium on *Stanley Cavell: Constellations of the Ordinary* at the Pontificia Universidad Católica del Perú in October 2019. I am grateful to Victor Krebs, the conference organizer and host, to my fellow colloquium participants (Avner Baz, Gordon Bearne, and Byron Davies), and to members of the audience for their questions and comments.