

7. Cavell's Critical Afterlives

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James Helgeson advances that “Cavell can hardly be called a mainstream influence on current literary-critical practice.”¹ Yet Cavell is at once a significant and a marginal figure, currently in the ascendant, perennially out of step. Cavell notes the fact that his work is untimely and freshly resonant by turns, observing that he is

somewhat protected from the sense that all that is happening intellectually, or intellectually happening, is the latest eventuality. Being odd, and staying odd, of course has its pains, but surprisingly, even increasingly, its pleasures, even that of remaining, however precariously, contemporary. When the breakers of canons discover that they have themselves become repetitive in their newer authorities, the older, modified out of their old authority, can have another hearing.²

The intellectual “revolutions” referenced in this quotation span a number of movements in literary studies and philosophy since the late 1960s, and I will look further at Cavell's relation to these developments, as well as the question of Cavell's own canon, in the course of this essay. Helgeson's observation could be true if we were thinking strictly about identifying a portable method. But Cavell's ideas have in fact had an extensive effect beyond his own formative discipline of philosophy. This is partly a result of their reception by younger thinkers, artists, and writers who were taught by him. Cavellian impressions can be traced in the work of the film-maker Terence Malick, poets Charles Bernstein and Michael Palmer, the critic Mark Greif, the novelist David Foster Wallace, the philosopher Martha Nussbaum, and so on. But

1. James Helgeson, “Reading Notes: David Rudrum on Stanley Cavell,” *Paragraph* 39, no. 3 (2016): 360.

2. Cavell, “Responses,” in *Contending with Stanley Cavell*, ed. R. B. Goodman (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 176.

his thought also has a more subterranean presence in contemporary literary and Americanist criticism that is more pervasive than we might expect.

While the line of descent that can be traced through Cavell's roles as a teacher and mentor is important, Cavell's imprint is also found beyond his own students, in the work of critics who have developed his ideas, insights, and preoccupations, including those who have extended them into addressing what are arguably his own project's blind spots, compromised attachments, and omissions. Echoes of his voice are thus not confined to the disciplinary corner that has tentatively called itself "ordinary language philosophy and literary studies." In broad terms, Cavell's work allows critics and philosophers to read literary texts as philosophically intentional, and to take account of philosophy's aesthetic expressions. More specifically, Lauren Berlant cites him as an influence on their prose style, Toril Moi on her way of thinking about how literary studies can take cues from Wittgenstein, Sianne Ngai on her idea of aesthetic judgement, and Branka Arsić on inheriting Emerson. Indeed, the formulation of the "other Emerson" — challenging hitherto prevailing interpretations of his writing — owes a debt to Cavell recognised by his coda to the volume of that name, and he is recognised as "a decisive influence in the recovery of transcendentalism as the founding moment of a distinctively American philosophy."³ Taking this picture as a whole, we can see that Cavell plays a role in informing an American critical scene in ways that might not be obvious at first glance.

Here I would stress a distinction between the literary critical scene as such, and an Americanist critical context, since both Cavell's impacts, and resistance to his work, have distinctive expressions in that milieu. As obituaries began to appear in the Summer of 2018, a group of philosophers, former students of Cavell, wrote in *The New York Times* highlighting the fact that Cavell's commitment to philosophy as a way to 'make sense of the human experience' is ineluctably tied to American commitments. They also observe that this is not often placed in the foreground of his wider reception:

what hasn't made its way into the tributes is the centrality of the question, woven through virtually everything Cavell wrote in his nearly 50-year career, of

3. Andrew Norris, *Becoming Who We Are: Politics and Practical Philosophy in the Work of Stanley Cavell* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 1.

what it means to be a citizen in the contradiction that is the United States of America — a country founded on a sacred commitment to liberty and justice as well as on the genocidal destruction of indigenous communities and the embrace of slavery, practices whose legacies have disgraced us.⁴

The authors of the piece, Bauer, Crary, and Laugier, are right to stress that this concern with American community is not a strand of Cavell's work that can be bracketed away. Cavell's philosophy makes claims about the relation between personal experience and culture as such. But 'culture' also refers to a located phenomenon. Throughout his writings, Cavell stresses the need to identify, rehabilitate, and build on the strands of US traditions that offer a remedy for what he calls the "debased perfectionisms" the culture is prone to celebrate.⁵ As Cavell sees it, this imperative involves, among other things, finding ways to acknowledge the value of American cultural production, discerning what it means to call oneself an 'American intellectual' in the apparent absence, at the time of his own intellectual formation, of a heritage equivalent to the European tradition, and finding philosophical significance in (relatively) low places.⁶

My aim is not to propose a reductively contextual frame for understanding Cavell's work, corralling it within a US ambit of influence. Cavell's ideas of course have purchase outside of his status as a North American thinker. But he is importantly recognisable in this designation, which usefully reveals his commitments and responses to events of his times, as well as highlighting problematic aspects of his project. As Susan Neiman, once one of his students, has suggested, identifying and working through the latter elements of the work is an important part of reception.⁷ This is a process that does not preclude inheritance, at the same time highlighting dissent, divergence, and ambivalence. Understanding the depth of Cavell's invest-

4. Nancy Bauer, Alice Crary and Sandra Laugier, "Stanley Cavell and the American Contradiction," *The New York Times* 2 July, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/07/02/opinion/stanley-cavell-and-the-american-contradiction.html>.

5. Cavell, "Introduction," *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome: The Constitution of Emersonian Perfectionism* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 16.

6. There are flashpoints in Cavell's oeuvre where these objectives, as well as their potential pitfalls, are acutely focalised. The role of Hollywood film in his work is such a site, invoking questions of American race politics, gender politics, sentimentality, and the aesthetic and philosophical potentials of mass culture, or the lack of them.

7. Susan Neiman, "What Cavell Made Possible for Philosophy," in *Inheriting Stanley Cavell: Memories, Dreams, Reflections*, ed. D. LaRocca (New York: Bloomsbury, 2020), 102.

ment in the “Americanness” of his work and its reverberations is useful in several ways. It helps us to pick apart the threads that differentiate Cavell from internecine debates in literary studies, although he intersects with that sphere. It gives us ways to look more closely at what might be sedimented in concepts picked up from the orbit of his work. Not least, as well as raising questions about risks his oeuvre runs, it allows us to think about what can be carried forward. Cavell’s orientations are conditioned by their historical times and contexts in ways we might wish to understand, given the extent of the influence that I have briefly signalled above. At the same time, his work also anticipates and informs some influential turns of our present moment, beyond such situatedness. Some of the most vibrant aspects of this afterlife are perhaps not the most apparently imitative, taking flight from Cavell in a process of absorption, but also of selection, extension, and even correction.

What Cavell describes as his being and staying ‘odd’ arises from various aspects of his project. One of these is his eclectic pantheon of influences, and the ways in which he puts them together. Another is the particularity of his style, which contributes to the impression of Cavell’s occupying a space adjacent to the different fields he has contributed to. Cavell’s conspicuously subjective voice was received as both his strength and Achilles heel throughout his career. The distinctiveness of his voice is not incidental to his philosophical aims, but integral, although as Mark Greif points out, “in laying bare the conditions of his enterprise he repelled as many people as he enchanted.”⁸ Some of Cavell’s sympathetic interlocutors adopt the rhythms, circumlocutions, cadences and confidingness of his prose, more and less consciously, while others aim to divest their own writing of his characteristic gestures.⁹ A sense of Cavell as freshly relevant, yet still eccentric, also derives from his relations to questions of critical politics, and to politics in general. As commentators observe, there are sticking points for Cavell’s reception in literary and cultural studies: the work’s perceived normativity, its humanism, its lack of structural/materialist analysis, its arrogation of a first-person plural voice, its side-lining of theory, a too-simple picture of the social dynamics of gender and race, and the preservation of the term ‘America’ as a conceptual operator to indicate romantic potentials (a non-exhaustive list). He is seen as in-

8. Mark Greif, “Cavell as Educator,” in *Inheriting Stanley Cavell*, 73.

9. On the latter, see Lola Seaton, “The Sound Makes All the Difference: Stanley Cavell’s Style,” *The Point*, October 18, 2022, <https://thepointmag.com/examined-life/the-sound-makes-all-the-difference>.

sufficiently sceptical, in the colloquial sense of the word, rather than in the philosophical sense that compelled him.¹⁰ More than this, his key terms of art are viewed, in some quarters, as aligned with conservative stances. An important instance of these is the contested terrain of the ordinary, an idea I will return to further in this essay.

For some, what is apprehended as Cavell's restorative drive is, rather than a point of resistance to reception, the source of his work's appeal. Rex Butler writes that "at a time of the questioning of 'theory,' or at least the particular 'French' variant of it that entered the Anglosphere from the late 1970s on, it is almost commensurately Cavell's own reputation that has risen [...] being seen as an alternative to artistic postmodernism with its exhausted emphasis on sceptical 'deconstruction' and cultural studies with its apparent stepping back from all beliefs."¹¹ Recalling the nature of Richard Rorty's portrait of the 'cultural left' in *Achieving Our Country* (1998), Butler suggests that developments in theory, or their generalised effects, 'might even be said to have led to — or at least partially explain — that disastrous collapse of liberal democratic coalition-building' that led to Donald Trump's election. Butler's comments here capture the sense of an 'alternative' modus that Cavell is sometimes claimed for. They also highlight the fact that the question of a choice of critical tone and approach has been tied up not only with literary-critical positioning, but with matters of American liberal disappointment, commitment, and self-image since the mid-twentieth-century, and especially since the social and political upheavals of the 1960s and 1970s.¹²

Cavell argues consistently that the mood of thought is substantive rather than superficial, drawing on both Emerson and Heidegger in support of this position. Mood and tone have been on the wider critical agenda in recent years as part of the contentious set of developments sometimes gathered under the heading of 'the method debates' in literary studies. I will not focus on these debates here, which may already have reached their conclusion. With important caveats in place, I aim to notice the ways that Cavell's themes seem to resonate with aspects of these develop-

10. See the introduction to Richard Eldridge and Bernie Rhie, *Stanley Cavell and Literary Studies: Consequences of Skepticism* (New York: Continuum, 2011) for a discussion of this.

11. Rex Butler, *Stanley Cavell and the Arts* (London: Bloomsbury, 2021), 1.

12. Butler is based in Australia, but his remarks here feed into this discussion.

ments, with a view to delineating his angles of difference from them. Cavell's seeming affinities with this turn in literary studies include his embrace of undejected moods, his identification of reading and writing as therapeutic, a refusal to separate the style and content of his thought, the acknowledgment of affective attachments, a stress on subjective experience as a basis for judgement, and an onus on practices of attention. In addition, Cavell's stress on language's effectiveness proposes a relation between reader and text whereby it is possible "to take seriously the dead earnestness" of the linguistic uses of both philosophy and literature.¹³ The apparent chiming of Cavell with certain contemporary critical positions stems in part from his role as an influence. It also flows from a broader renewed interest in some of the experiential streams, such as phenomenology and pragmatism, that have fed into his work. Yet while there is evidently some overlap, Cavell's animus is expressive of different anxieties and sources, something not always in view. Cavell's concern with what it is to be an American intellectual (specifically, as opposed to a European one), and the case he makes for the distinctiveness of a North American philosophical genealogy, undergird both his reception of theory, and his positions on critique and polemic.

Critical sallies against 'suspicious' modes of scholarly reading have elicited a number of valid objections. One of these is the fact that as David Kurnick spotlights, a change in mood or disposition on the part of educators cannot act as a panacea for the structural and funding problems that literary studies face in the neoliberal university.¹⁴ On this view, an emphasis on the personal orientation of critics and readers can be seen as a displacement of responsibility. Another objection is the way that this critical conversation tends to centre some aspects of the discipline and not others, in this way laying claim to greater novelty. For example, critics in the fields of ethnic literature studies and race studies have long explored the significance of being personally and affectively implicated in their scholarship. However, these fields do not set personal implications against structural concerns, or against the contexts and histories that surround and direct reading, instead foregrounding their imbrication. It is also worth remarking that there are dimensions of the debate about the tonal regis-

13. Nancy Yousef, *The Aesthetic Commonplace: Wordsworth, Eliot, Wittgenstein and the Language of Every Day* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022), 172.

14. See David Kurnick, "A Few Lies: Queer Theory and Our Method Melodramas," *ELH* 87, no. 2 (2020): 349-74.

ters of criticism that run parallel but somewhat adjacent to what is occurring in literary studies more widely, since they are contributions to a located American conversation about whether a hopeful disposition is a discredited facet of the process of imaginatively engaging with the project of expediting national change.

In common with critics like Rita Felski, Cavell rejects the equation of “serious thought with a reflex negativity.”¹⁵ However, his dismissal of negation as a place from which to proceed is tied up with the weight he places on writing, and with the connection he makes between writing and both personal and national improvement. Cavell’s interpretation of American romanticism is vital to these connections. Cavell’s placement of a romantic inheritance at the heart of his work may not alter its fundamental inspiration, but it does affect its expression. For some commentators, his move toward the transcendentalists from his project’s wellsprings in ordinary language philosophy is actively problematic. Charles Altieri ruefully remarks, describing his disappointment in Cavell’s work following *Must We Mean What We Say* and *The Claim of Reason*: “And then Cavell discovered Emerson.” While Cavell’s early work had “freed then young literary critics to bring philosophical thematics to the work of close reading,” his turn to romanticism meant that “everything in his early work that stressed the ordinary and the communal has to be recast.” For Altieri, Emerson’s presence in Cavell’s pantheon skews it in the direction of “melodramas of self-formation.”¹⁶ Altieri regrets the way that the American transcendentalist inheritance bends Cavell’s ideas in the direction of self-cultivation, away from the impersonal affordances of ordinary language. For Cavell, the issue is more complex, since the mutual implication of the individual and the collective (and institutions) is unavoidable, a fact to which language is testament. Yet the notion of personal change does matter for his project. The register of conversion in Cavell derives from several sources, including Freud, but Emerson is crucial among them as a source of the idea that the self changes as it learns, since “Emerson always insisted that the truth cannot be obtained by purely cognitive procedures but rather occurs only if the subject who accesses

15. Rita Felski, *The Limits of Critique* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2015), 186.

16. Charles Altieri, “Cavell’s Imperfect Perfectionism,” in *Ordinary Language Criticism: Literary Thinking after Cavell after Wittgenstein*, ed. K. Dauber and W. Jost, with an afterword by Cavell (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2003), 199 and 200.

these procedures changes in the process of coming to know them.”¹⁷ This foregrounding of Emerson, and of a self-formation that is conducive to the wider community, draws Cavell’s project into American, and Americanist, debates.

Christopher Castiglia suggests that the fundamentally hopeful objectives of critics now working in American literary studies who came of age in the 1960s are conveyed via a cynical effect in the present.¹⁸ In this vein, Castiglia outlines a dispositional stance with which Cavell would likely be in sympathy, at least in regard to the role Emerson plays in its formulation. Castiglia and Cavell highlight an optimistic Emersonian mode that is won in the face of grief, where optimism is a “discipline.”¹⁹ For Cavell, the issue of that “Emersonian cheerfulness to which an old European sophistication knows so well how to condescend” is tied up with the distinctiveness of a North American intellectual tradition, as well as with the idea that this mode articulates a precarious and intermittent apprehension that “we know that a new picture of life and duty is already possible.”²⁰ For Cavell, the American scholar must “raise and cheer” since “in a democracy, which depends upon a state of willingness to act for the common good, despair is a political emotion, discouraging both participation and patience.”²¹ As a choice of style and mood, such cheerfulness stands in a reflexive relation to the act of writing: “I suppose Emerson is claiming to know this, as we do, only in liberated moments. Then presumably his writing the thought was one such moment — as if something about such writing tends to such moments. Does reading such writing provide us with further such moments? If — or when — it does not, how could we fail to find Emerson’s claims intolerable?”²²

Cavell’s philosophical programme revolves around “declarations and denials of interest” in speech and writing. The aspiration to “further and fuller accounts and enactments of interest” underscores a central point, that there can be no grounds for establishing community outside processes of exchange that both bring us to aware-

17. Branka Arsić and Cary Wolfe, “Introduction,” in *The Other Emerson*, ed. B. Arsić and C. Wolfe, with an afterword by Cavell (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010), xxiv.

18. Christopher Castiglia, “‘A Democratic and Fraternal Humanism’: The Cant of Pessimism and Newton Arvin’s Queer Socialism,” *American Literary History* 21, no. 1 (2009): 160. See also “Teaching, Hopefully,” *Journal of Narrative Theory* 41, no. 2 (2011): 182-192.

19. Castiglia, “The Cant of Pessimism”: 162.

20. Cavell, “Time After Time,” in *Here and There: Sites of Philosophy*, ed. N. Bauer, A. Crary, and S. Laugier (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2022), 22.

21. Cavell, *Cities of Words: Pedagogical Letters on a Register of the Moral Life* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2004), 18.

22 Cavell, “Time After Time,” 23.

ness of and ongoingly determine what we value.²³ However, alongside this larger brief, there is an American dimension to Cavell's characterisations of the search for community that is already present in the earlier work, and which becomes concretised through his turns to Thoreau and then Emerson in the 1970s and 1980s. For Cavell, the combination of ordinary language philosophy and American romanticism is congruent:

the sense of the ordinary that my work derives from the practice of the later Wittgenstein and from J. L. Austin, in their attention to the language of ordinary or everyday life, is underwritten by Emerson and Thoreau in their devotion to the thing they call the common, the familiar, the near, the low [...] I see both developments — ordinary language philosophy and American transcendentalism — as responses to skepticism.²⁴

But this combination is not received as apt by all admirers. Altieri laments Cavell's Emersoninian epiphany for the change of direction it presages:

one can grant Cavell's brilliance and still be bothered by how deeply American Cavell is in his setting the 'I' over against society so that it can represent possibilities for coming to own a self who resists conformity in order to enter what we might call a dialectic of mutual exposure [...] I doubt Wittgenstein would think that the way for philosophy still to know itself is for it to turn to confronting the culture with itself along the lines in which it meets in the philosopher.²⁵

The further problem with Emerson's increasing prominence in Cavell's writing, for Altieri, is that Cavell "has to tilt the aesthetic, in life and in art, back to the ethical where he can thematize."²⁶ The aesthetic and the moral are indeed imbricated in

23. Richard Eldridge and Bernie Rhie, "Introduction: Cavell, Literary Studies, and the Human Subject: Consequences of Skepticism," in *Stanley Cavell and Literary Studies*, 11.

24. Cavell, "The Philosopher in American Life," in *In Quest of the Ordinary: Lines of Skepticism and Romanticism* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 4.

25. Charles Altieri, "Cavell and Wittgenstein on Morality: The Limits of Acknowledgement," in *Stanley Cavell and Literary Studies*, 63.

26. *Ibid.*, 77.

Cavell. He does not read for wonder, enjoyment, or diversion, although these may be involved, or to understand the complex cultural matrices from which a work has emerged in a literal sense. He sees textual interpretation, and being interpreted by a text, as training. The goal of such interpretation is large: “the pursuit of a transformative self-knowledge,” to the benefit of the collective.²⁷ Cavell’s Emersonian perfectionism is thus entwined with the cases he makes for reading texts through their details, sharing aesthetic judgements, and choosing certain writerly moods and tones.

Cavell’s work troubles the boundaries between literature, criticism, philosophy, and other kinds of writing. However, he retains a significant concern with metaphilosophical questions, and with what it means to be a philosopher in an American intellectual culture rather than in a European one. These preoccupations also inform his position on critique, and his reception of theory. Cavell stresses the distinctiveness of philosophy as an undertaking, while aiming to increase its purview, and speaks of a “career-long wish for the work [he does] to be answerable to professional philosophy.”²⁸ As Michael Fischer points out, this goal also matters in terms of the kinds of texts (including films) that Cavell returns to:

The works that interest Cavell show themselves to be steeped in philosophical issues (such as skepticism), committed to philosophical goals (such as liberation from false necessities), and capable of philosophical rigor in their thinking and writing. By calling these works “philosophical,” Cavell is claiming that they reward a deep level of attentiveness and seriousness in our approach to them. Instead of giving up on academic philosophy, he wants these works to put pressure on it, and for him that means continuing to call them “philosophical” and persisting in writing “at once inside the profession of philosophy and outside.”²⁹

Cavell casts himself as defending philosophy from both scientism and theory, rather than as striving for his work to attain the status of cultural criticism or literary theory. Given the era in which he studied, it is perhaps unsurprising that the professional de-

27. Norris, *Becoming Who We Are*, 17.

28. Cavell, “The Wittgensteinian Event,” in *Philosophy the Day After Tomorrow* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005), 210.

29. Michael Fischer, “Stanley Cavell and Criticizing the University from Within,” *Philosophy and Literature* 30, no. 2 (2006): 474.

bates that animate Cavell are not those most current to philosophy now, nor to the broader critical-cultural conversation. Although Cavell anticipated intellectual turns that have become uncontroversial in the intervening years, our expectation that his work should have greater currency still may stem from the fact that his choice of subjects for analysis comprises both films and literary texts, and from the links he makes between domains of culture. Christopher Benfey points out that “Cavell resembled in certain ways his brilliant contemporaries William H. Gass and Susan Sontag. All three were trained in academic philosophy during the 1950s, the heyday of the rivalry between the more humanistic “continental” philosophy (centred in Germany and France) and the more scientific “analytic” philosophy in the US and Great Britain,” and all were exposed to ordinary language philosophy.³⁰ While as Benfey elaborates, the three also brought their philosophical interests into conjunction with more artistic goals, Cavell retains his disciplinary allegiance in important ways. Further, Cavell feared (at least in the 1980s) that literary scholars had misunderstood the importance of Austin’s innovations:

Austin seems to have come under the protection rather of the literary than of the philosophical profession. Whatever the justice here, the cost of this protection — so far — has been, from my angle, exorbitant, because the literary profession takes it — so far — that ordinary language is contrasted in Austin with *literary* language, whereas its contrast and contest is with words as they appear in *philosophy* (if you can spot that).³¹

Writing a little later, in the 1990s, Cavell observes, “[e]veryone recruited into our present academic and cultural wars seems to have an answer to the question of philosophy. Some say that philosophy is literature, some say it is science, some say it is ideology, some say it doesn’t matter which of these, if any, it is. For me it matters, as it matters that each of these identifications seems contentious.”³² Cavell can be arch

30. Christopher Benfey, “The Hum of Humanity,” *The New York Review of Books*, May 12, 2022, <https://www.nybooks.com/articles/2022/05/12/the-hum-of-humanity-stanley-cavell-christopher-benfey>.

31. Cavell, “Notes After Austin,” in *Here and There*, 107-8.

32. Cavell, *A Pitch of Philosophy: Autobiographical Exercises* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994), vii.

about academic fashion, but his resistance to theory has further dimensions. Developments in theory, most often referenced in Cavell by way of Derrida, are seen by him to have eclipsed incipient American critical modes dating from midcentury, traditions that remain for him somewhat unclaimed. These modes include the writings of those gathered as the New Critics and the New York Intellectuals, as well as those of associated figures such as Paul Goodman and Robert Warshow.³³ Significantly, American and French thinkers are also viewed by Cavell to stand in antithetical relations to their forerunners and to histories of thought: “For Derrida the land of thought is fully occupied, as it were, by the finished edifice of philosophy [...] whereas for an American the question persists whether the land of thought has as yet been discovered.”³⁴ American intellectual time, Cavell says, runs on different tracks to that of Europe: he dates it from Emerson.³⁵ We can note here that identifying Emerson as the origin of ‘thought’ in America has consequences for what counts as such thought and for who produces it, and for what might go unsaid, or partially said, in a tradition defined in this way. It is also worth remarking that Cavell’s anxiety about the lack of a shared North American intellectual culture would not be framed in his terms in the present, nor US culture placed in this relation to Europe, although these were — to some extent — live questions during the period in which he was trained. If the issue of a shared philosophical corpus bears on Cavell’s differentiation of the American situation from the European, the role of the university is another divergence for him. In “The Division of Talent,” recently collected in *Here and There*, Cavell contrasts European and US intellectual and university culture, suggesting that “here in North America [...] it is always doubtful [...] whether our voices, without echo, can make it to one another across the smallest fields.”³⁶ Cavell also presents American-French philosophical divergences in expressing key concepts as intimate but weighty differences: “the cultural (or say stylistic) distance between American and French intellectual life sometimes strikes me as maddeningly untraversable; too near to ignore, too far to go.”³⁷ As ever for Cavell, much of substance hinges on style: “differences be-

33. I have addressed this topic in more detail elsewhere.

34. Cavell, *Contesting Tears: The Hollywood Melodrama of the Unknown Woman* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 65.

35. *Ibid.*, 62.

36. Cavell, “The Division of Talent,” in *Here and There*, 86.

37. Cavell, *Contesting Tears*, 67.

tween what I do and what deconstruction does seem to me registered in my speaking of presentness (which is about me and my world) instead of (meaning what?) presence,” a manner of speaking in an ordinary — not a metaphysical — voice.³⁸

If Cavell’s rejection of ‘French theory’ and its legacies stems from a differently situated set of factors than those that motivate such rejections in literary studies now, his rejections of critique are likewise specific and contextual. Kurnick draws attention to the fact that the portrait of the practitioner of critique presented in recent criticism (such as that of Felski) is often knowingly satirical and heavily bowdlerized. He observes that “this is a caricature not of our actual social or intellectual lives but of our ego-ideals—the miniature Adornos and de Beauvoirs we have perched on our shoulders.”³⁹ Cavell rejects such sources of the critical super-ego, but he does so expressly in light of his quest for the recognition of alternative, North American, avatars of intellectual seriousness. And while he aims to read and write, like Felski, from what Heather Love identifies as “everyday forms of judgment, experience, and feeling,” and to undo the sense of the critic as standing in a class apart, for Cavell it is the academic philosopher, in particular, who is an unrepresentative reader.⁴⁰ The opposition he draws is not between practiced or skillful reading as such and “naïve” reading. Further, Cavell casts both the act of writing, and the act of interpreting literature, as matters of the highest cultural and personal importance. He places a premium on writerly conviction. If “postcritique” can be seen, in its worries about disciplinary self-definition, audience, and value, to be overshadowed by neoliberal university conditions and the “embattled prestige” of humanistic disciplines, Cavell’s stance contrastingly takes shape in a certain amount of confidence about the role of the university as a place in which to think, albeit one with limitations as well as strengths.⁴¹ Cavell credits periodicals with a formative role in the evolution of his intellectual life, but as two scholars who have also become editors — Mark Greif of *N+1* and Jon Baskin of *The Point* — discuss in an interview together, “Cavell never attempted to reach a truly broad audience, or even what we might call a magazine readership.”⁴²

38. Cavell, *In Quest of the Ordinary*, 174.

39. Kurnick, “A Few Lies,” 354.

40. Heather Love, “Critique is Ordinary,” *PMLA* 132, no. 2 (2017): 365.

41. Kurnick, “A Few Lies,” 352.

42. Jon Baskin, “The Man Against Everything,” *The Chronicle of Higher Education* January 8, 2017, <https://www.chronicle.com/article/the-man-against-everything>.

The site from which he explores the boundaries of the popular and the philosophical is a model of a dedicated scholarly life that has become rare, and the university remains for him an indicator of a public good to be prized, even if incompletely realised.

We now stand in a different relation to the significance of popular culture, and to audiences for criticism, to that delineated by Cavell's writing. Although Cavell proposes that some expressions of popular culture merit the utmost attention, it is not a given in his work that such culture in general is deserving of consideration, as his readers have remarked. Critics also notice that "Cavell's literary tastes tend to run toward classics" and that he is not drawn to postmodernism.⁴³ Lola Seaton describes Cavell's relation to the texts that resonate most strongly for him in quasi-religious terms. "Cavell — who quite often confesses to not knowing, or only recently having become acquainted with, the works of seminal thinkers" is

an extremely thorough, never-finished, almost exorbitant reader of a narrow personal canon. He chronically revisits fragments from his favorite texts — Wittgenstein's *Investigations*; later, from the Seventies on, Emerson's essays and Thoreau's *Walden* — or rather appears to carry them with him, to unendingly coax new significance from phrases he knows by heart, a little as though these cherished works were scripture, or songs he can't get out of his head.⁴⁴

On one hand, Cavell pursues no defined method of reading, since he is guided by his response to the details of each text and film he chooses to discuss. On the other hand, his manner of reading is overdetermined, as Seaton suggests here, since themes arising from dearly held works — and his own prior writings — reverberate extensively elsewhere.

In addition to the narrowness of Cavell's personal canon, there is the question of the kinds of writers and philosophers included in it. Cavell's orienting move is "to understand philosophy not as a set of problems but as a set of texts."⁴⁵ The philoso-

43. Dmitri Tymoczko, "Dear Stanley," *Journal of Music Theory* 54, no. 1 (2010): 21.

44. Lola Seaton, "The Sound Makes All the Difference: Stanley Cavell's Style," *The Point* October 18, 2022, <https://thepointmag.com/examined-life/the-sound-makes-all-the-difference>.

45. Cavell, *The Claim of Reason: Wittgenstein, Skepticism, Morality, and Tragedy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), 3.

pher Robert Gooding-Williams, in his response to Cavell's reading of the film *The Band Wagon*, prompts Cavell to think further about which texts are covered by this designation, and to turn towards the ways African American writers and thinkers — “Douglass, Du Bois, Ellison” — have picked up Emerson's gauntlet and negotiated his legacy: “critically but not deafly.”⁴⁶ Cavell expresses enthusiasm for the possibility in his reply to Gooding-Williams, yet with the caveat that he is tentative about taking up this thought, as about responding to feminism, without “invitation.”⁴⁷ The right to participate in such conversations is for him a genuine question. But while Cavell argues for the significance of jazz, for example, as a uniquely American artform, the lack of meaningful engagement with black thought and writing as part of the American philosophical pantheon highlights both the idiosyncrasy and the generational nature of the ways that Cavell's textual touchstones are selected. Michael A. Peters argues that the “whiteness” of American philosophy is an arresting aspect of the tradition, entailing not only an evasion of history as such, but an avoidance of the history of American thought and its genealogies. Peters discusses Cavell alongside Rorty in these terms, highlighting an absence of systematic engagement with the structuring force of America's race politics. “Whiteness” as Peters defines it here comprises both the figures included in the tradition as well as the neglect of the subject of race politics as crucial to the American polity. It is a philosophy for which “whiteness” is normative. Peters' rendering of Cavell's patriotism is a little un-nuanced in this piece, but the attention drawn to the nature of the discipline, and to its history, is helpful. Cavell construes his eclectic personal canon as one formed by the following of intuitions, but questions of milieu, timing, academic subject, and exposure matter in significant ways.⁴⁸

I have been suggesting in the foregoing discussion that when considering Cavell's critical afterlives, it is useful to recognise what his work carries along with it. These entailments include not only particular philosophical loyalties, questions, and citational practices, midcentury debates and anxieties about the status of North

46. Robert Gooding-Williams, “Aesthetics and Receptivity: Kant, Nietzsche, Cavell, and Astaire,” in *The Claim to Community: Essays on Stanley Cavell and Political Philosophy*, ed. A. Norris (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2006), 262.

47. Cavell, “The Incessance and the Absence of the Political,” in *The Claim to Community*, 301.

48. Michael A. Peters, “White Philosophy in/of America,” in *Education, Philosophy and Politics: The Selected Works of Michael A. Peters* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2012), 214-15.

American culture, and American liberal political allegiances. They also involve the complexities of keeping a romantic “America” intellectually in play. Cavell posits what he calls “America’s high promise to itself to be something new to the world,” alongside associated modes of melancholy, loss and despair.⁴⁹ If “America” is, as Colin Koopman puts it, “but a conceptual shadow haunting extant political geographies,” only ever a “prospective concept,” Cavell has wanted to preserve its ghost.⁵⁰ He is scrupulous not to identify “America” with the nation state, acknowledging that the word carries unwelcome freight. But he retains the word to indicate a set of potentials: “The future — call it America, or call it the world that may be — cannot be approached as in a picture of a boat approaching a shore.”⁵¹ Cavell finds in the word “America” a way of expressing the fact that self-division is a desirable condition. In his perfectionist and romantic discourse, the name carries connotations of eventual democracy, more prosaically it also “names the place you can be a secular Jew and at home.”⁵² As heavily qualified and differentiated from official myths and narratives as this concept is in Cavell’s work, it is a highly vexed way to express such aspirations. What might remain of Cavell’s legacy if those receiving his work were to refocus, moving away from the romantic dimension of his project as that dimension relates to America?

Cavell’s project, ranging across ordinary language philosophy, film criticism, Shakespeare studies, modernism, the legacies of Kant, Wittgenstein, Heidegger and Nietzsche, and romanticism, is acknowledged to be eclectic, singular, and generative. But, as Russell B. Goodman remarks, it is “work people do not quite know how to use.”⁵³ Indeed, “use” does not seem to be the right framework for describing the relation between this body of work and its inheritors. As Andrew Klevan points out, while he can read closely, Cavell does not primarily do so, instead having a tendency to “generalize, to tell us about meanings rather than build them.”⁵⁴ Cavell’s own reading can be allegorical, it can be

49. Cavell, *Cities of Words*, 189.

50. Colin Koopman, “Pragmatism as a Philosophy of Hope: Emerson, James, Dewey, Rorty,” *The Journal of Speculative Philosophy* 20, no. 2 (2006): 113.

51. Cavell “Time After Time,” in *Here and There*, 27.

52. Cavell, *A Pitch of Philosophy: Autobiographical Exercises* (Cambridge, MA; Harvard University Press), xv.

53. Russell B. Goodman, “Introduction” in *Contending with Stanley Cavell*, ed. R. B. Goodman (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 3.

54. Andrew Klevan, “Cavell at Film Criticism: An Unreadiness to Become Explicit,” in *Inheriting Stanley Cavell*, 65.

strong reading, it can be inference and association. Further, particular aspects of his work are not easily extractable from other elements without altering them, since the whole has many mutually referring and interwoven parts. As Klevan astutely notices, it is not so much Cavell's practice of reading texts, itself not a method but rather a range of approaches — "sometimes aesthetic, sometimes phenomenological, sometimes moral, sometimes linguistic, sometimes analytic, sometimes continental, sometimes psychoanalytical" — but his thematics, critical attitudes, exemplars, moods, and ethos that have most frequently been taken up by other writers and critics.⁵⁵ To some extent, as Lee Wallace elaborates, Cavell also anticipates contemporary experiments in writing that traverse the boundaries of theory and memoir, since "faithfulness to Cavell does not require fidelity to his critical style. Instead it requires adherence to his method of bringing into the space of textual interpretation experiential vectors that may generate unexpected recognitions, these being more widely applicable than the individual films or personal circumstances to which they were initially attached. That is the autotheoretical invitation of his work."⁵⁶

Such experiential vectors notably include the fact of personal attachment. For Cavell, the decision to write philosophically about his disparate intellectual interests is related to "the question of whether I am in possession of my own experience, or instead follow dictation laid down by profession or by fashion or by some more private identification."⁵⁷ As such, valences of gratitude, praise, or pleasure may enter into his response to a text or artwork, but (in principle) these do not remain simply personal or immersive for him. Hence, although gratitude to exemplars plays an important role in his writing, Cavell argues that attachment warrants excavation, and that praise can fail in eliciting conviction or agreement from others.⁵⁸ Not only is it important that praise can fail, but the distinction between cases (such as activist contexts) where a critical orientation of praise and recognition towards the objects of attention and interpretation might be called for, and those where it is less useful, matter, because as Bruce Robbins points out, "not all objects deserve love equally."⁵⁹ The need for reflexivity in interrogating the chosen objects

55. *Ibid.*, 67.

56. Lee Wallace, "Stanley Cavell and the Queer Thought of Movies," *Screen* 63, no. 1 (2022): 115.

57. Cavell, "To Place Wittgenstein," in *Here and There*, 98 (this quotation is drawn from comments on Walter Benjamin).

58. It is an open question whether all of the Hollywood films, for example, to which Cavell is committed, bear up under the claims he makes for them.

59. Bruce Robbins, "Not So Well Attached," *PMLA* 132, no. 2 (2017): 375.

of our attention and our responses to them returns us to the contested idea of the ordinary, its role in Cavell's work, and the reasons that the term invites opprobrium.

If pursuit of the 'ordinary' sounds conservative to most, Cavell casts it as the opposite: a mode of demystification. In order for both personal and social change to happen, for Cavell, there must be a prior work of examination, which he formulates, among other avenues, through his readings of both Wittgenstein and American romanticism. However, as I mentioned at the outset, the idea of the 'ordinary' is contentious. It conjures accommodation to the status quo, the banal, and the uninspired. Dmitri Tymoczko, a one-time student of Cavell's (who construes him as in some respects a perilous mentor), describes ordinariness as a "sinister" idea, explaining that

for many of us, "ordinary life" can involve a demeaning job, mediocre achievements, romantic dissatisfaction, uncertain health care, or four hours of daily television, against which we are confronted by the periodic but indisputable irruptions of extraordinariness into human culture — whether those of Bach or Nietzsche or Einstein or Coltrane or Michael Jordan or Cavell himself.⁶⁰

Cavell's own sense of the ordinary is again a matter of philosophy's registers. As Simon Critchley describes it, on this picture "the everyday is not a network of practices or forms of life to which we can return by [...] taking a turn in the street or a job in Woolworths [...] the ordinary is not a ground, but a goal."⁶¹ However, if the ordinary is 'not a ground but a goal' for philosophy, the term has other connotations in (American) literary and cultural studies, which is complicating.

Mark Greif parses Cavell's particular view of the pursuit of the ordinary, where, with a romantic slant, it is a commitment to "an investigation of [...] what sort of condition we are really in, and how else we might be."⁶² This investigation of our condition remains, however, something different from decisive collective action. In a frequently cited passage from "The Avoidance of Love," written in the context of the war in Vietnam, Cavell says that America (allegorised in the passage as "the Yankee") could rise to its potential, but "it will take a change of consciousness. So phenome-

60. Tymoczko, "Dear Stanley," 21.

61. Simon Critchley, *Very Little... Almost Nothing: Death, Philosophy, and Literature* (London: Routledge, 1997), 139.

62. Mark Greif, "Cavell as Educator," in *Inheriting Stanley Cavell*, 81.

nology becomes politics.”⁶³ Political change seems here to be routed through individual sensibility and psychology, with the onus falling on changes in this domain. Neiman wryly comments that this stance is “as American as apple pie.”⁶⁴ I have mentioned sticking points in Cavell’s reception. One of these is the perception of a stress on personal transformation rather than structural change flowing from Emerson’s eventual role at the head of Cavell’s cast of exemplars, another is the sense that he remains within normative frameworks he might do more to challenge. In the final part of this discussion, I look further at these frameworks and turn toward some of the ways that Cavell is taken up by his inheritors, including modes of inheritance extending beyond his own investments.

Cavell’s philosophical politics can be described as romantic as well as psychological, although ordinary language philosophy remains a crucial element in this context. John-Baptiste Oduor argues that Cavell’s focus on “the worldview of the individual moral agent” precludes engagement in his work with a political understanding of “relations of power, of the historical development of social institutions, and of the economy.”⁶⁵ Although such relations were signalled in his writing, Cavell’s approach to them was often indirect. Both building on and re-weighting his emphases, philosophers, critics, and theorists varying from those who are in some degree to those in large part influenced by Cavell, have brought more structural, materialist, or experimental understandings together with his constellation of concerns and concepts. In some instances, they also move them away from the thematics of American improvement, and/or American romanticism, and onto a broader canvas. This can mean drawing out implications and applications latent in his work, or taking up what he seems to address incompletely. It can leave elements behind, or involve supplementation and conjunction. Cavell’s work thus opens paths that he may not have taken himself.

One of Cavell’s most discernible impacts is the way he revives the ordinary language tradition, a precedent that spins off in a number of directions. Cavell consistently argues that Wittgenstein is not a conservative thinker, advancing the view that, as Ben

63. Cavell, “The Avoidance of Love,” in *Must We Mean What We Say: A Book of Essays* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 346.

64. Neiman, “What Cavell Made Possible,” 102.

65. John-Baptiste Oduor, “The Shadows of Stanley Cavell,” *The Nation* October 27, 2022, <https://www.thenation.com/article/culture/stanley-cavell-here-now-essays/#:~:text=A%20posthumous%20collection%20of%20essays,project%20of%20ordinary%20language%20philosophy>.

Ware puts it “there is nothing in Wittgenstein’s view of philosophy [...] which speaks against a transformation of our existing forms of life.”⁶⁶ In this Cavell anticipates by a wide margin current critical and creative efforts to think through the non-conservative ends that commitment to the ordinary, and to ordinary language, can be enlisted for. Cavell’s own project remains relatively abstract — the everyday in his work is never *that* everyday. But it is possible to draw a line from his thought to more textured and detailed explorations of the daily, the micro, and the infra, including those that draw on ordinary language. Cavell and Wittgenstein provide scaffolding for the anthropologist Veena Das’ understanding of the ordinary in her ethnographic microhistories and microgeographies. In philosophy, Sandra Laugier brings ordinary language philosophy to feminism, and to the ethics of care “defined as a practical response to specific needs (of vulnerable persons) and a sensitivity to the ordinary details of human life that *matter*.”⁶⁷ Maggie Nelson’s genre-crossing writing is a literary example of new engagements with Wittgenstein, as to some extent is Ben Lerner’s concern with language games and public discourse in his novel *The Topeka School*.⁶⁸

Beyond Wittgenstein’s example, Cavell’s work can be brought into conjunction with other sources of the impetus to consider what lies hidden in plain sight. For Cavell, moral life happens from moment to moment, in ways we might not notice. While moments are of their nature ephemeral, on his view there are resources for their coming into focus. This notion comes into play in Cavell’s ideal of criticism. Criticism — of artworks, films, and written texts — is for him a representative way of allowing the significance of the momentary to crystallise, since “we have in any art, the opportunity to find, but always the freedom to miss, the significance of the nothing and the nowhere.”⁶⁹ As Lloyd Pratt points out, close readings and acts of interpretation can make more plural and nuanced understandings of both where we are now, and where we have been, available, opening onto a “dilatatory” present.⁷⁰ For Cavell, in addition to the possibilities

66. Ben Ware, “Williams and Wittgenstein,” *Key Words: A Journal of Cultural Materialism* 9 (2011): 46.

67. Sandra Laugier, “Cavell on Feminism and the Ethics of Care,” *Conversations: The Journal of Cavellian Studies* 6 (2018): 55.

68. In contemporary film studies, Andrew Klevan turns back to Austin and Wittgenstein to propose Ordinary Language Film Studies as a method of detailed attention to individual films.

69. Cavell, “A Capra Moment,” in *Cavell on Film*, ed. W. Rothman (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2005), 142.

70. Lloyd Pratt, “Close Reading the Present: Eudora Welty’s Queer Politics,” in *Queer Times, Queer Becomings*, ed. E.L. McCallum and M. Tuhkanen (New York: State University of New York Press, 2011), 185.

of the present that we might not see unless looking closely, without the present and its conditions, however less than ideal, there is nothing to work from. The decontextualized world of conventional philosophical questioning is thus cast as slippery ice: no good for walking, and Cavell is fond of Wittgenstein's exhortation "back to the rough ground!"⁷¹ This matters to him philosophically, in terms of method, as well as providing a basis for whatever might happen next politically. The traction offered by the present is cast as a means of establishing where things stand, and a place from which to decide whether they might be otherwise.

As the editors of *Here and There* explain, for Cavell "words spring to life in concrete places and spaces of speech [...] The circumstances of what we say — to whom, from where — matter as much as the meaning of our words."⁷² Cavell's work also emphasises "a commitment to responsiveness and conversation."⁷³ In the notable absence of extensive engagement with black American writing on his own part, Alice Crary argues that it is around such responsiveness that Cavell could find points of convergence with the writings of W. E. B Du Bois, Ta-Nahesi Coates, and Claudia Rankine. As Crary puts it: "Cavell represents us as obliged to continually take seriously the possibility that we might need to reshape our modes of responsiveness with an eye to a more just vision of the social world."⁷⁴ For Crary, this means that "Cavell is in a position to welcome into rational democratic conversation, for instance, the sorts of liberating forms of artistic expression that Du Bois was discussing."⁷⁵ Rankine writes in her genre-crossing *Just Us: An American Conversation*, "to live only in the archives of conversation is, perhaps, to see what the culture has formed, willingly. Repeatedly? Sure."⁷⁶ Cavell shares this sense of the need for an intentional stance towards the conversation that forms a culture and the possibility of intervening in it, not simply instrumentally. Derek Gottlieb argues for the congruity of Cavell's project with a "method of intervening in public space and inviting others to share in one's picture of things, in one's judgments" that stems from African American organising, and that is relevant to understanding the interventions of the Black Lives Matter movement: "The stakes are not restricted to the

71. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, ed. G. E. M. Anscombe and R. Rhees, trans. G. E. M. Anscombe (Oxford: Blackwell, 1953), §107.

72. Nancy Bauer, Alice Crary, and Sandra Laugier, "Editors' Introduction," in *Here and There*, 3.

73. *Ibid.*, 2.

74. Alice Crary, "Cavell and Critique," *Conversations: The Journal of Cavellian Studies* 6 (2018): 22.

75. *Ibid.*

76. Claudia Rankine, *Just Us: An American Conversation* (London: Allen Lane, 2020), 219.

next election cycle. As in every confrontation, and with every issue, the conversation reveals the extent to which we do or do not in fact live together, and elucidates the conditions under which we may continue — or begin — to do so.” For Gottlieb, “Cavell’s scene of conversation is [...] dramatically dissimilar from [...] exchanging reasons with an aim of persuasion [...] because *consent* is perpetually at issue, the requested alteration occurs at the deeper level of agreeing in judgments.” Thus, in a Cavellian conversation, “a confrontation between interlocutors over a matter of common concern, bodies forth and enacts a certain polity.”⁷⁷

Cavell emphasises the ways that philosophy is close to lived life, asking “Why [...] is kicking a hard object more of a definitive ‘refutation’ of immateriality than, say [...] putting your hand on the arm of a friend.”⁷⁸ The idea that matters of import can be, and sometimes must be, addressed in embodied, enacted, diurnal ways, is also advanced in other kinds of scholarship. If Cavell omitted or held back from significant engagement with writing by women and by people of colour, Imani Perry brokers a link between Cavellian concepts and these spheres. Where others have picked up responsiveness, acknowledgement, and conversation as notions that can be extended, Perry draws on Cavell’s idea of passionate utterance, identifying this in the characterization of Pilate in Toni Morrison’s *Song of Solomon*.⁷⁹ As Perry further explains, in her piece in remembrance of Cavell, the humanities need the ‘corrective’ of critical studies, but what can be taken away and extended from Cavell’s work is the “possibility that exists and persists in human encounters,” not only as mediated by literature, but in life. This possibility “is key because it means we might move towards more ethical human relations [...] nothing under the sun, no matter how conventional, is static. At each refreshed moment transformation is possible.”⁸⁰

In addition to holding out the possibility of such transformation, as commentators note, Cavell’s writings could do more to establish an understanding of the starting point. Naomi Scheman highlights the fact that philosophy as a discipline has been slow

77. Derek Gottlieb, “Something Must Be Shown: Consent, Conversation, and the End of Reasons,” *Conversations: The Journal of Cavellian Studies* 5 (2017): 33-34 and 30-31.

78. Cavell, “The World as Things: Collecting Thoughts on Collecting,” in *Here and There*, 43.

79. Imani Perry, “The Flowers Are Vexed: Gender Justice, Black Literature, and the Passionate Utterance,” in *New Directions in Law and Literature*, ed. E. S. Anker and B. Meyler, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 259-62. See also Perry’s *Vexy Thing: On Gender and Liberation* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018).

80. Perry, “Cavell’s Passionate Utterance,” *ASAP Journal* July 26, 2018, <https://asapjournal.com/cavells-passionate-utterance-imani-perry>.

to turn away from normative frameworks. She finds Cavell alert to the power imbalances underlying that normativity, but advances that he could go further.⁸¹ She has reservations about Cavell's gendering of skepticism, while at the same time suggesting new engagements with his themes. In her essay "A Storied World," she presses on the philosophical question latent in the collective pronoun "we" that Cavell so riskily embraces. As she explains, "it is a matter of ethical and political commitment to create a useable *we*," conceiving the "achievement of a *we*" in her own terms as something that "lies beyond a rolling horizon, and part of what moves us toward that horizon is attentiveness to those who are excluded from the *we*'s that shape our practices, excluded by our culpable ignorance, indifference, fear, or contempt."⁸² What directions might there be for aspects of Cavell's thinking if these were to be pushed beyond the broadly normative nature of philosophy's claims, and beyond the contexts and influences I have highlighted for the ways they condition and inflect his work?

Cavell's stress on the need to identify, examine, and take responsibility for one's attachments, investments, and desires shares ground with ideas of micropolitics that run through a French tradition since Foucault. In this vein, Lauren Berlant bridges the ostensible French theory/American thought divide, formulating a conception of ordinariness that draws on both Cavellian and Deleuzian traditions. Berlant's ordinary takes into account the ways that capitalism intersects with affective life, as well as foregrounding its threats to the development of the self. Others have also brought aspects of Cavell's work into conjunction with elements of theory, cultural studies, and critique, revealing compatibilities, or making links, that he did not pursue. Thomas Dumm takes up the Cavellian ordinary for political science, but also claims poststructuralist influences. Sianne Ngai inherits aspects of both Cavell and Adorno. Ngai pushes the importance of aesthetic judgement, and of the apparently minor, into areas Cavell did not, exfoliating these in relation to commodity culture, retaining his influence alongside others that matter to her. Must those inspired by Cavell's work adopt his enchantments, especially those tied to a particular American historical experience, as well as to romantic national aspirations? Cavell's exemplars, moods, and ethos have been put to work across numerous disciplines, in scholarship that encompasses a perhaps surprising

81. Naomi Scheman, "A Storied World: On Meeting and Being Met," in *Stanley Cavell and Literary Studies*, 103.

82. Scheman, "A Storied World," 104.

scope. Those who inherit Cavell the least exactly — throwing him off, as well as taking him on — may be the legatees he would most have wished for, in his repeated suggestion that texts and films can “teach beyond themselves,” revealing possibilities their makers did not see. Although his work has sometimes elicited it, Cavell is chary of imitation, returning often to Emerson’s maxim, that “Truly speaking, it is not instruction, but provocation, that I can receive from another soul.”⁸³

83. Ralph Waldo Emerson, “An Address Delivered Before the Senior Class in Divinity College, Cambridge, July 15, 1838,” in *Emerson’s Prose and Poetry*, ed. J. Porte and S. Morris (New York: Norton, 2001), 72. I would like to thank Paul Jenner for reading and responding to an earlier draft of this essay.