

“Language must be raked”: experience, race, and the pressure of air

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ABSTRACT

This essay begins by clarifying the notion of what Stanley Cavell has called “Emersonian moral perfectionism”. It goes on to explore this through close analysis of aspects of Emerson’s essay “Experience”, in which ideas of trying or attempting or experimenting bring out the intimate relation between perfectionism and styles of writing. “Where do we find ourselves?” Emerson asks, and the answer is to be found in part in what we write and what we say, injecting a new sense of possibility and responsibility into our relation to our words. But that language and the lives that go with it are at the same time burdened with a past, and in the case of English, and the American context especially, it is marked with a kind of repression relating to questions of slavery and race. These matters are implicated in questions of constitution, in both general and specific senses. Hence, inheritance and appropriation become causes of critical sensitivity, as do the forms of praise acknowledgement that should meet them. The essay explores ways of thinking through Emerson’s relation to these aspects of experience and seeks to find responses pertinent to today.

Intellect annuls Fate. So far as a man thinks, he is free. And though nothing is more disgusting than the crowing about liberty by slaves, as most men are, and the flippant mistaking for freedom of some paper preamble like a "Declaration of Independence," or the statute right to vote, by those who have never dared to think or to act, yet it is wholesome to man to look not at Fate, but the other way: the practical view is the other (Emerson, “Fate”, 1983, pp. 953-954).

Perfectionism, as I think of it, is not a competing theory of the moral life, but something like a dimension or tradition of the moral life, that spans the course of Western thought and concerns what used to be called the state of one’s soul, a dimension that places immediate burdens on personal relationships and on the possibility or necessity of transforming oneself and one’s society. . . (Cavell, 1990, *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome*, p. 2)

There are reasons to be wary of perfectionism. The criticism of Nietzsche that John Rawls provides in *A Theory of Justice* (1971) takes a line that is familiar and, at first sight, reasonable enough. Rawls understands perfectionism, especially as it is advanced by a text such as *Schopenhauer as Educator* (1965), in terms of two principles. The first is that society should arrange its institutions and define the duties and obligations of individuals so as to maximize the achievement of human excellence, in art, in science and in culture. The second is that human kind must work

continually and single-mindedly to produce individual great human beings. These principles combine in a view that Rawls holds to be inherently elitist and undemocratic. The gross appropriation of supposedly Nietzschean ideas in Nazism compounds these worst fears.

Yet a wealth of scholarship has revealed Nietzsche's texts to be preoccupied with something other than this reading would suggest and, in any case, to be resistant to any single interpretation. Polyvalence is part of their point. Stanley Cavell has famously taken up these thoughts, in responses to Rawls sustained over the forty or so years that they worked together in the Philosophy Department at Harvard University. But the force of his objections, as time has gone on, has derived from a different allegiance. In Cavell's work since the writing of *The Claim of Reason* (1979), his return to Emerson has become progressively more pronounced. This is a return in the sense that it is a revisiting both of texts first encountered in high-school, encountered then, no doubt, as part of the American literary heritage, and of ideas elaborated in the summer of 1971, when he wrote his book on Thoreau, *The Senses of Walden* (Cavell, 1992). The line of connection might not at one time have been clear, but it is now widely appreciated that Nietzsche had read Emerson when he was in his teens, and a consideration of his themes quickly reveals overlaps, borrowings, and influences of multiple kinds. Hence, the dismissal of Nietzsche in Rawls' fairly brief remarks might be taken by implication to be a dismissal of Emerson. This would be a manifestation of what Cavell has been at pains to reveal as a characteristic form of American repression, its repression of its own best cultural achievements.

So, it must be asked, in what does Emerson's perfectionism consist? Talk of perfection can be heady stuff, and a convenient more or less definitional move can help to clear the air. Perfectionism is not perfectibility. Some of the most grotesque political developments in history have been motivated by faith in the possibility of creating a perfect society—perfectible according to some more or less abstract principle or according to a substantive ideal of human nature. Perfectibility would then be the idea that, with appropriate social engineering or coercion, perfection can be realised, here on earth. Perfectionism, by contrast, emphasises the imperfect nature of forms of human settlement, and it takes this in the round: unlike conceptions of ethics that compartmentalise human experience and see questions of morality as arising only in special circumstances, perfectionism takes the human condition to be forever open to criticism and to possibilities of betterment. Not to see this would be tantamount to hubris and complacency.

Cavell has coined the phrase "Emersonian moral perfectionism" to bring together the strands of an outlook that he finds in Emerson; but, for Cavell, its instances span great literature and philosophy as well as a range of films, including those Hollywood films, "talkies" of the 1930s and 40s, in which the possibilities of dialogue—or, let's say, conversation—are always to the fore. The place of conversation in such perfectionism is something to which we shall return. Emerson's perfectionism is here taken to be essential to the criticism of democracy from within.

In *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome*, Cavell provides an initial gloss. He has in mind:

an outlook or dimension of thought embodied and developed in a set of texts spanning the range of Western culture, a conception that is odd in linking texts that may otherwise not be thought of together and open in two directions: as to whether a text belongs to the set and what feature or features in the text constitute its belonging (Cavell, 1990, p. 4).

Plato's *The Republic* is given as an initial example. "Obvious candidate features," he continues, are its ideas of (1) a mode of conversation, (2) between (older and younger) friends, (3) one of whom is intellectually authoritative because (4) his life is somehow exemplary or representative of a life the other(s) are attracted to, and (5) in the attraction of which the self recognizes itself as enchained or fixated, and (6) feels itself removed from reality; whereupon (7) the self finds that it can turn (convert, revolutionize itself) and (8) a process of education is undertaken, in part through (9) a discussion of education, in which (10) each self is drawn on a journey of ascent to (11) a further state of that self, where (12) the higher is determined not by natural talent but by seeking to know what you are made of and cultivating the thing you are meant to do; it is a transformation of the self which finds expression in (13) the imagination of a transformation of society into (14) something like an aristocracy, where (15) what is best for society is a model for and is modelled on what is best for the individual soul, a best arrived at in (16) a view of the new reality, a realm beyond, the true world, that of the Good, sustainer of (17) the good city, of Utopia (pp. 6-7). Cavell's enumerated list is in fact somewhat longer than the one I have provided.

That these are "candidate features" should imply that the list is indicative and open-ended rather than definitive, and I take the enumeration to underscore the multifaceted nature of the perfectionism he wishes to describe. It is important in this, as subsequent points indicate, that morality is not the subject of a separate philosophical field of study (of the kind found in the standard course in "moral philosophy" or "ethics"), separate from the imagination of the good city, for to conceive it thus would be to acquiesce in a kind of moralism. Finally, it is of the utmost significance also that such perfection is held to exist in an intimate relation with writing, specifically with a conception of writing committed to

the achieving of an expression public enough to show its disdain for, its refusal to participate fully in, the shameful state of current society, or rather to participate by showing society its shame, and at the same time the achieving of a promise of expression that can attract the good stranger to enter the precincts of its city of words (p. 7).

The writing of philosophical prose then comes into competition with poetry such that it claims for itself "the privilege of the work poetry does in making things happen to the soul" (*ibid.*).

Perfectionism and experience

I propose to attend a little to the work done in making things happen to the soul in Emerson's essay "Experience". The metaphysics of process and the ontology of moods expounded in this essay throws particular pressure on its style of expression. To begin with, it is, of course, an *essay*—the form of writing that Emerson inherits from Michel de Montaigne, amongst others, and that his own work significantly takes forward. Unlike the systematic unfolding of a thesis, the essay is an experiment with language, where thought is not, say, reported or described but enacted in the text: for the writer and the reader. The topic of "Experience" is peculiarly pertinent to the form, for experience and experiment here come together—in the registering of occurrences from which something can be learned, and, qua lecture or lesson, as something that is read. In fact the word "experience" derives from the Latin *experior* and, hence, from *perior*, which is a deponent verb that means to try, attempt, or test, and also to undergo experience. In what ways is experience realized in the text?

Let me instance this with four examples, sentences that bear closer attention.

(i) "*Where do we find ourselves?*"¹

This, after the poem with which the essay is prefaced, is the first line of the first paragraph of the essay. It prompts most obviously perhaps (and stressing "Where") the question of how things are now, of where we have come to at this stage in history. What is this place, this time? But the question admits a different accentuation, this time on the word "ourselves". What in the midst of this confusion of life are we to make of ourselves? Who are we, collectively and as individuals? Lingering between these two accentuations and weakening the boundary between them, there is the further, more idiomatic question: what have we come to, what do we amount to? And somewhere amidst this there is the projective thought, the challenge to our thinking: how should we go about finding ourselves? There are conjoined here questions that are political and historical, metaphysical and ontological, and perhaps above all existential, and these, as it were, vie for attention. None of this is settled for the reader. The reader is in the position of having to read.

At a more self-consciously literary level, the line also carries an echo—of the beginning of Dante's *Divine Comedy*. Here it is in Seamus Heaney's translation²:

In the middle of the journey of our life
I found myself astray in a dark wood
where the straight road had been lost sight of.

The way we had relied on has given way, the foundations have trembled under our feet, and we are unsure how to go on. But what we now find will become something we shall have found, and hence may become the foundation for our next step: our finding, whatever form it will take, will be a

new founding. And the way forward will be a matter of next steps—each step, as Thoreau will express this, providing the *point d'appui*, the leverage we need, for the one to follow so that our progress consists in little perfections, each immediately superseded by a further step on the way. Around every circle, another can be formed. You complete a project, some further realization of yourself, and once it is completed you are already outside, in a position of having to adjust to what you have done, and hence no longer defined by it. You are ready to move on. Otherwise, you are caught in the after-image of a shape that no longer contains you.

In Emerson's account of this ongoing series of turning-points in the middle and midst of life, the political aspirations are never far away, and politics, it becomes clear, will require something more than natural development. "I am ready," Emerson writes, "to die out of nature, and be born again into this new yet unapproachable America I have found in the West" (Emerson, 1983, p. 485). America then is something other than the landmass that, so it was imagined, had been discovered; and it represents something more than nature. America, the aspiration of the Pilgrim Fathers, remains still to be discovered, its democracy a democracy still-to-come. It is a perfection to be striven for, not to be realised. But "striving" may not be quite right here either, or at least not quite right just by itself, because there can be something too singular, too imposing, about the delineation of a project and earnest application to its realisation, where the illusion of the fixed goal paves the way with good intentions. Something more nuanced and receptive is required: "All I know is reception," Emerson writes; "I am and I have: but I do not get, and when I have fancied I had gotten anything, I found I did not" (p. 491). Reception points away from the kind of imposition of thought found in the much-vaunted (philosophical) aspiration to clear and distinct ideas and to the mastery of concepts. The illusory nature of such mastery is indicated in the next quotation.

*(ii) "I take this evanescence and lubricity of all objects, which lets them slip through our fingers then when we clutch hardest, to be the most unhandsome part of our condition."*³

The sensuous qualities of Emerson's vocabulary here, with the onomatopoeia of "evanescence", "lubricity", and "slip" pitched against "objects" and "clutch", elicit a response to words in their materiality as signs that is denied, or cannot be acknowledged, in the supposed rigour of conceptual analysis. They prepare the way for the more surprising, strange, and therefore challenging term "unhandsome", an expression that, in straining to say "unbeautiful", draws attention back to the hand and to what eludes it, anticipating by a century or so Heidegger's intimation of thinking as a handicraft. Our condition is unhandsome in part because we persist in clutching, expecting a firm grasp of things, turning things into "objects".

Receptiveness to experience extends in the next quotation through our relationship to chance, invoking a term around which Emerson's thought recurrently turns.

*(iii) "We thrive by casualties. Our chief experiences have been casual."*⁴

In speaking of the casual, Emerson is calling attention to a point that language is making for us on its surface: namely, that what we do casually, every day, unthinkingly, distractedly—the hierarchies we assume, the slights we deliver and suffer, our adaptations (Emerson calls this our conformity) to the unconscionable—are as permanent in their effects, as much matters of life and death, as are catastrophes (see Cavell, 2003, p. 6). But the accidents of connection and association that the term yields (with its root in the Latin *caedo, cadere, cecidi, casum*) stretch more widely than this, throughout and beyond Emerson’s work—through “accident,” “incident,” “coincident,” “case,” and “occasion.” Philosophers preoccupy themselves with “What is the case?” seeking to understand the connection between propositions and states of affairs. They seldom attend to what is meant by “case” or to its proximity to the casual, to accidents and occasions; and they do not register its harbouring of connections with what happens to happen, what befalls us, and, hence, with the Fall. It is worth remembering also, amidst the cadences of these terms, that grammatically, at least, cases are said to decline. “What is the case?” by contrast, carries an air of gruff factuality, secure and fixed.

Our response to the casualties of our existence is such that, in a recurrent repetition, compulsive in its own way, we re-enact a kind of fall from the grace of being at one with our lives—that is, able to live them fully as opposed to faking our existence. In the essay “Self-Reliance” this is expressed in the indictment: “Man is timid and apologetic; he is no longer upright; he dares not say ‘I think,’ ‘I am,’ but quotes some saint or sage.” This, Cavell suggests, is Emerson’s *cogito*, no less. More subdued expression of a similar thought is found, however, in the next quotation.

(iv) “It is very unhappy, but too late to be helped, the discovery that we have made, that we exist.”⁵

The discovery is late in that it confronts the human being with the sense of a unity with the world already lost, so that progress here will not be a matter of an impossible return to that unity, say through a kind of nostalgia, but by a more robust acknowledgement and affirmation of one’s existence: that to exist (ex-ist, as a human being) is already to be outside yourself—outside yourself in a sane way, Thoreau will say.⁶ Or, as Emerson more affirmatively puts the matter, “The pleasure of life is according to the man that lives it, and not according to the work or the place. Life is an ecstasy” (p. 963)

Emerson opens a further, related thought with the words: “I know that the world I converse with in the city and in the farms, is not the world I *think*.” This is the gap between the actual and the possible, the space where the imagination is given rein and opens the possibility of thinking things as other than they are. It opens things *in their possibility*, which, as Heidegger will attempt to show almost a century later, is the way that things in the world must be—that is, that understanding things in this way is constitutive of world. It is with this separation of the actual and the possible that the world and human being are realised. In fact, it is not only that things in the broadest sense must be understood in such a way: this is a mutually

defining relationship through which the fabric of human life comes into existence. This is the fabric of experience itself, and it is the condition of the complexity of institutions—from grief and the burial of the dead to colonialism and its aftermath, from reading and writing to politics and the practice of slavery. It is the condition of constitution and of the Constitution, in whose inspiring declaration “We, the people, . . .” the political deficit was, Emerson saw, still so shamefully exposed.

Of the pressure of air

“Experience” is written against the background of the death, some two years before, of Emerson’s son, Waldo, who had died at the age of five. Where do we find ourselves, Emerson asks, and the imagery of stairs and of circles⁷ with which this is associated prompts the thought of reality not as following a linear path but as serial, the essay being a form of writing that is peculiarly well-matched to this insight. Thus, the *First* and *Second Series* of Emerson’s *Essays* register different kinds of separation or breaks in his work and life. Of the deaths that mark departures, transitions, and beginnings, Julie Ellison has written:

Death also constitutes one of the fundamental serial realities of Emerson’s career. His father died when he was eight; his first wife died after 18 months of marriage in 1831; his adult brothers, Edward and Charles, died in 1834 and 1836, respectively; and then Waldo in 1842 (Ellison, 1999, p. 142).

Yet this essay, “Experience”, is not exactly about death. With regard to grief, Emerson writes provocatively: “The only thing grief has taught me, is to know how shallow it is. That, like all the rest, plays about the surface, and never introduces me into the reality, for contact with which, we would even pay the costly price of sons and lovers” (Emerson, 1983, p. 472-473). In fact the death of his son, as with this series of deaths, is given ostentatiously passing mention. Later in the essay, what might purport to be an explanation runs:

Grief too will make us idealists. In the death of my son, now more than two years ago, I seem to have lost a beautiful estate, — no more. I cannot get it nearer to me. If tomorrow I should be informed of the bankruptcy of my principal debtors, the loss of my property would be a great inconvenience to me, perhaps, for many years; but it would leave me as it found me, — neither better nor worse. So is it with this calamity: it does not touch me: some thing which I fancied was a part of me, which could not be torn away without tearing me, nor enlarged without enriching me, falls off from me, and leaves no scar. It was caducous. I grieve that grief can teach me nothing, nor carry me one step into real nature (p. 473).

The primarily botanical word “caducous” here allies this aspect of human experience to the falling of the petals of the flower or the leaves of the tree:

they fall easily and perhaps before the expected time; and such is the case with the loss of loved ones, a part of the human condition, a part of its fate. “The book of Nature is the book of Fate,” Emerson writes (p. 949), and later in the same essay, “Fate”, he qualifies the more sanguine tone of the earlier works: “Once we thought, positive power was all. Now we learn, that negative power, or circumstance, is half” (*ibid.*). Fate is understood as a limitation, “in matter, mind, and morals, — in race, in retardations of strata, and in thought and character as well” (p. 953), and such limitation is not simply to be overcome. Nor, Emerson is emphatic, is it something to which we should simply succumb, for ours is a dual world: “[w]e must respect Fate as natural history, but there is more than natural history. For who and what is this criticism that pries into the matter?” (*ibid.*).

There is a danger, it should be clear, of being drawn into the orbit of Emerson’s aphorisms and the distinctive cadences of his prose, which for all its substantive surprises has rhythms that, like Shakespeare’s blank verse, accord with something fundamental in the human voice—that is, with its dependence on inhaling and exhaling, on subtle modulations in the pressure of air. Emerson’s approach in this respect anticipates ideas advanced by the poet Charles Olson, in his influential essay, “Projective Verse”. The essay draws attention to “certain laws and possibilities of the breath, of the breathing of the man who writes as well as of his listenings” (Olson, 1950). Breathing itself—and not forgetting the proximity of notions of respiration and inspiration and spirit—demonstrates with peculiar immediacy the relationship between inside and outside, whose vitality and measure depends precisely upon a regulation of the fluctuating pressure of air. It prompts also an understanding of thought and reality, as of speaking and writing, not so much as stable structure but as propulsive force, of a gathering and issue of productive energy, step after step. The play of positive and negative power in Emerson can be figured as the pressure of air.

Of word, character, and type

The imagined boundaries between speech and writing are weakened also by the fact that writing is itself a physical act, an act involving the marking of a page, the nib of the pen scratching its marks across the surface, and in the process constructing its lines of text, with a regularity without uniformity. Think here of an Agnes Martin painting, where the abstract, apparent uniformity of fine grids of lines is happily betrayed by the crumbling of the pencil-lead that draws them.⁸ These fragmenting marks effect patterns of continuity and connection that give way to undulating rhythms of light. A powerful analogue of writing is provided by Thoreau’s depiction of his planting of the bean-field, his effort to make a kind of living for himself during the period just short of two years that he lived beside Walden Pond. The hoe cuts and divides the earth, marking the lines, exposing the earth to air, ready for the planting of the beans. This more or less blatant figuring of writing prompts the consideration of writing’s physical work. This has, to be sure, taken on new forms since Thoreau’s day, but it continues to exercise powers of thought and an imagination of speech in which rhythm and a sense of the energy latent in signs can be powerfully present. Such potential

energy is not self-contained within the sign but functions rather through the sign's necessary dependence upon reception, all of which further blurs the boundaries between the active and the passive. Jacques Derrida's phrasing of this facet of reception is that the sign is unsaturated with meaning, an observation that targets in particular the seeming stabilisation and fixing of meaning in writing. The mechanisation of writing powerfully reinforces this apparent stabilisation, with the printing press, the type-writer, and the word-processor bringing uniformity in new forms, on an unprecedented scale.

The rise of that technology is not unrelated to the development in the 18th century of the taxonomical sciences. The world in which Emerson grew up continued to be under the strong influence of the developing "sciences of man", which subjected human beings to a new kind of examination and scrutiny. In "Fate" Emerson speaks in despairing tones of the "New Science of Statistics", footnoting this with Adolphe Quetelet's principle:

Everything which pertains to the human species, considered as a whole, belongs to the order of physical facts. The greater the number of individuals, the more does the influence of the individual will disappear, leaving predominance to a series of general facts dependent on causes by which society exists, and is preserved (Quetelet, quoted in "Fate", Emerson, 1983, p. 950).

It was possible, Quetelet believed, to determine the average physical and intellectual features of a population, and to identify the regularities of normal and abnormal behaviour. Accurate measurements of individuals belonging to a particular race or nationality would make it possible to determine any unknown physical or intellectual aspect of the population in question. Such thinking plainly contributed to a static and hierarchical conception of race, and, two centuries later, the idea of biobehavioural essences continues to leave its imprint on thinking.

Inevitably Emerson was affected by the prejudices of his time, and notions of fixed racial types and of a hierarchy between them would scarcely have been unfamiliar. In diary entries at the age of nineteen, tussling with the maxim that "all men are born equal", he asserts that "Nature has plainly assigned different degrees of intellect to these races, and the barriers between are insurmountable" (Emerson, 1982, p. 19). Yet this is within a series of concessions that he builds in what he goes on to describe as "specious argumentation", in defence of the "worst institution": "No ingenious sophistry can ever reconcile the unperverted mind to the pardon of *Slavery*" (p. 21). What is true also is that he was unusually sensitive to the ways that the ambiguities that attach to "type" and "character", their connecting of the substance of a judgement with the manner in which it is inscribed, indicated something profound about the way that belief in racial types was fuelled. Emerson was prescient in his growing recognition that supposedly biological categories were socially constructed. This was an aspect of his insistent sense of our responsibility in our words and thoughts.

Emerson always hated slavery, yet he was initially cautious about institutional reform and perhaps wary of the hectoring zeal of the

abolitionists, on the grounds of what he took to be the necessity of a more profound release from the servitude inherent in prevailing ways of thought. By the 1840s, however, he had become a powerful voice in the movement. Consider the following remarks, respectively from “Fate” and from the earlier address on the tenth anniversary of the emancipation of slaves in the British West Indies:

You have just dined, and, however scrupulously the slaughter-house is concealed in the graceful distance of miles, there is complicity, — expensive races, — race living at the expense of race (Emerson, 1860, p. 945).

From the earliest time the negro has been an article of luxury to the commercial nations. So has it been, down to the day that has just dawned on the world. Language must be raked, the secrets of slaughter-houses and infamous holes that cannot front the day, must be ransacked, to tell what negro slavery has been (Emerson, 1844, p. 753).

The tonal precision of “scrupulously” and “graceful distance of miles”, and, in the second quotation, the careful offensiveness of “article of luxury to the commercial nations”, produce a mock gentility that is abruptly confronted by “the slaughter-house”. In the first quotation, given the paragraph from which it comes, Emerson is talking about matters of animal and human life and their ecology, and “race” ostensibly has a wider-than-human significance. But there is a kind of compression of implication here such that “race living at the expense of race” brings most clearly into focus the human exploitation of human-kind. In the second quotation the slaughter-houses are coupled with the more vague yet no less sinister “infamous holes”. If these are to be brought to light, language must be “raked”. Here again there is this early insight about the extent to which our world, with its institutions and practices, is constructed through language. Raking, then, as we have seen in Thoreau, would imply a freeing of the soil, in a process of oxygenation, that severs the roots of the weeds that bind and, exposing the earth to the air, releases the possibilities of new growth.

It is certainly possible that, when he wrote these passages, Emerson was thinking in part of Montaigne’s “On the Cannibals”.⁹ Montaigne’s *tour de force* leads the reader from horror at and curiosity about a remote “barbaric” practice towards a realisation of the barbarity of the reader’s own “civilisation”. The essay does not deny or diminish the horror of cannibalism, but the exploration of the topic achieves a distancing on European society and disgust at its own gross forms of exploitation: it leads to the thought that colonization is an excessive form of consumption. Europeans feed off other peoples of the world to a greater extent than do the cannibals themselves. And this is a consumption that does not renew as it consumes and that in the end must become consumptive. This chain of connection invites the thought that the outcome is not so much a matter of growing fat: it has rather to do with the inability to breathe.

Emerson in two?

Where are we to find Emerson's legacy in respect of these matters today? We have the subtle and complex figure whose ideas I have attempted to evoke in this essay, but there is also that icon of the American literary heritage, sometimes seen as the champion of American individualism. Cavell has lamented the latter reception on the grounds not only of its inaccuracy but of the kind of repression it effects. That repression would extend, of course, to distinctive and indeed essential contributions to American culture from black experience, not least in music and dance. Cavell has addressed such matters in various ways, though sometimes to his cost. He has pondered questions of inheritance and appropriation, and sought to show the difficulties of acknowledgement and praise. Praise can be hollow or bombastic, empty or false, and acknowledgement can degenerate into formulaic ready-made responses, tainted with condescension. Recognition of the extent of the repression in respect of this inheritance is enough to brush one with madness, against which such responses may be a convenient defence.

Consider, then, his treatment of two sequences from the 1953 Vincente Minelli film *The Band Wagon*. "Something Out of the Ordinary", the title of his Presidential Address to the American Philosophical Association (Eastern) in 1997, intimates both what is to be taken or understood *from* the ordinary world (that is, the apparently inconsequential sequence in question) and *that it is extraordinary* (out of the ordinary). The title of a lecture he presented in the following year, in Amsterdam, which examined a sequence from a few moments later in the film, was "Fred Astaire Asserts the Right to Praise",¹⁰ which might imply that, difficult though acknowledgement and praise may be, it would be wrong to shy away. A brief gloss on the scenes in question may help. In *The Band Wagon*, Astaire plays a song-and-dance man whose career has faded and who returns to New York in the hope of making a come-back. By chance, as he gets off the train, he meets Ava Gardner, playing herself, who greets him warmly before turning her attention to the pack of reporters who are waiting for her, inadvertently upstaging him. Soon after, however, and now by himself, he drifts into a penny arcade and listlessly wanders from machine to machine, testing his strength, reading his fortune, and finding how "gorgeous" he is. At a critical moment, in a sequence that Cavell details meticulously, Astaire trips over the outstretched foot of a black shoeshine man, sitting idly and disconsolately, waiting for work. At this, Astaire breaks into song, serenading the man with "When there's a shine on your shoes. . .", a song well-known from the 1932 musical *Flying Colors*. But the song changes rhythm, the shoe-shine man responds, and a stylised, balletic shining of Astaire's shoes takes place. Then suddenly Astaire springs from the raised chair, leaping dramatically into the air: the rhythm becomes frenzied as Astaire now cavorts crazily around the arcade, repeating compulsively "shine, shine, shine". And then, with a further change in rhythm, and with the music finding a new, more emphatic, more obvious jazz form, the two men dance together. Cavell sees this both as a tribute to the black traditions of song and dance from which Astaire's art has come and, more importantly

and provocatively, as figuring a possibility of democracy: the obvious inequalities are at least for this short time suspended, as the two men enjoy a kind of mutuality or reciprocity. At the walk-off, and as normality returns, Astaire exits under a sign marked “The Proud Land”.

Michael Rogin had earlier written of the sequence briefly and dismissively as a further illustration of Hollywood’s “racialized entertainment as commodity” (Rogin, 1996, p. 9), of the exclusion and exploitation of black people by white, but Cavell, while not denying this, is piqued by what it fails to see. ‘This perception of exclusion,’ Cavell writes,

must not be denied, nor blunted. But Rogin’s violence of attitude, understandable as it may be—a perception of systematic, blatant, and prolonged injustice may well brush you with monomania—does not allow him to recognize that Astaire’s dance of praise is itself to be understood specifically as about this painful and potentially deadly irony of the white praise of a black culture whose very terms of praise it has appropriated, even climactically about being brushed with madness in one’s participation in it (Cavell, 2005, p. 69).

In the secondary literature Cavell’s discussion has generated, Robert Gooding-Williams’ response stands out for its forthrightness (Gooding-Williams, 2006, Chapter 4; Cavell, 2005, Chapter 3). He acknowledges that certainly Cavell is “right to insist that the walk-off demonstrates that the two can dance together on an equal basis, equally choreographed, equally happy, and so on” (Gooding-Williams, 2006, p. 60). But crucially he reformulates, and presses to a different conclusion, a question at the heart of Cavell’s discussion. While Cavell has focused his attention on “this painful and potentially deadly irony of the white praise of a black culture whose very terms of praise it has appropriated”, Gooding-Williams recasts the problem as follows: “How can white praise of a black culture whose terms of praise it has appropriated defeat its perhaps inevitable tendency to a sort of *theatricality* that is pitched to white fantasies and ideologies about African Americans?” (p. 62). Crucial to the present discussion, however, is the fact that Gooding-Williams’ discussion ends by pondering what it might mean to “expand the horizon of consequences that Cavell follows out to include a hearkening to African American voices in tracing out the significance of Emerson’s philosophical legacy” (Gooding-Williams 2006, p. 261). If Emerson’s thought has been repressed in the culture he founded, could it be that part of the present task is to listen to African-American philosophical thought, a “tradition less embarrassed to receive Emerson, and so less inclined to repress him” (p. 262)? Could it be that such writers have “had a hand in Emerson’s destiny, and that they have handsomely turned that destiny to the hope of democracy” (ibid.)?

Cavell is generally firm in his resistance to the detail of Gooding-Williams’ criticisms and reading of the scene, but he welcomes this concluding speculation as a “gloriously pertinent suggestion” (Cavell, 2006, p. 301).¹¹ Hence, I take the opportunity here to turn to a writer in whom questions of inheritance, originality, and appropriation, in respect of Emerson, must have been keenly felt: Ralph Waldo Ellison. How could

Ellison, author of *Invisible Man* (1952), a landmark novel of the mid-20th century pondering these same questions, not be affected by this inheritance? Inheritance is written into his very name. How in fact did he deal with it?

Invisible Man is a first-person narrative depicting the coming into adulthood of a black man. Through talent and education, he makes his way from somewhere in the South to New York, where, in virtue of his intelligence and oratorical skill, he is adopted by the Brotherhood, an activist group challenging the structures of capitalist society (who are delighted to have recruited him, even if he is not quite as black as they had hoped), and encounters also an underground organization committed to something like black nationalism (who view him with suspicion). Eventually, in the chaos of the Harlem riots, he is forced to withdraw from the public profile he has achieved as an orator mobilizing the people and in effect to run into hiding. But the end of the novel is in its beginning. The first pages of the novel are the almost surreal, dream-like account of where the narrator ends up: underground in a cellar, which, in his passage from darkness into light, in his making the invisible visible, he has illuminated with strings of bare lightbulbs, with electricity stolen from “Monopolated Light & Power”. This Prologue contrasts immediately with the naturalism of the story that then gets under-way, and the novel continues to disconcert in its subtle bending of narrative genres.

The novel’s relation to Emerson is realized in a master-stroke. As Ross Posnock aptly expresses this:

Arguably, the virtuoso performance of appropriation in the novel is Ellison’s turning of “Emerson” into a figure of protean significances in excess of received wisdom. In naming two characters “Emerson,” one a wealthy pillar of the establishment, the other his angry defiant offspring, Ellison sets the canonical figure of sovereign selfhood spinning, as it collides with its subversive kin. The tensions generated by the two “Emersons”—one stolidly familiar, the other secretly “flowing”—not only testify to the wit and audacity of Ellison’s reworking of a crucial precursor, but also constitute one of the most searching acts of cultural criticism to be found *within* a novel (Posnock, 2005, pp. 9-10).

The point of these remarks, and indeed of Ellison’s subversive ploy, must not be to identify the true Emerson, although I certainly do not want to withdraw my warnings against the “literary heritage” version mentioned above. It is rather to recognize that in the Emerson examined earlier in this paper, identity and thought are mobile: the point must be not to succumb to, or, say, merely to savour, the aphorisms but to take them as goads to finding words of one’s own. Indeed, the place where the narrator of *Invisible Man* ends up is one where the insignia of success have been exposed and found wanting,¹² where the young man’s aspiring and affirmative reception of the culture has, so it seems, sent him to a place from which he must begin again. But “A hibernation is a covert preparation for a more overt action” (Ellison, 2001, p. 13).

In an acerbic essay from the early 1960s, “The World and the Jug”, Ellison criticises those writers—Irving Howe above all¹³—who would tell the reader how life is for black people in the United States, ignoring the variety of that experience. Howe’s “hero” is Richard Wright, while James Baldwin and Ellison himself are the “villains” (Ellison, 2003, p. 156). In barbs that draw on wilfully diverse registers, he accuses Howe of adopting a kind of blackface, while turning “Negroness” into a metaphysical condition (pp. 158, 177). Asserting that both he and Baldwin are products of the library rather than the store-front church, and affirming what he has gained from reading Marx, Freud, T.S. Eliot, Pound, Hemingway, and Stein, he writes:

I understand a bit more about myself as a Negro because literature has taught me something of my identity as a Western man, as a political being. It has taught me something of the cost of being an individual who aspires to conscious eloquence. It requires real poverty of the imagination to think that this can come to a Negro *only* through the example of *other Negroes*, especially after the performance of the slaves in re-creating themselves, in good part, out of the images and myths of the Old Testament Jews (p. 164).

Later, ending on a “personal note” and addressing Howe directly, he draws the following distinction: whereas one cannot choose one’s relatives, one can, as artist, choose one’s ancestors. He proceeds to list ancestors with names drawn from those listed above but then blatantly and mischievously subverts his own distinction by calling Langston Hughes a relative. The point of these remarks is in part to reinforce a sense of what W.E.B. Dubois had called the “kingdom of culture”, which can never be more than there in the making (an expression of perfectionism, not perfectibility), and to reiterate the idea that culture is appropriation. Ellison’s idea of what it is to be a human being is political in the sense that it foregrounds one’s responsibility for oneself in this endeavour. The proximity of the aesthetic to the political consists precisely in the requirement in aesthetic judgement that one speak in one’s own voice. We are, he might well have said, singularized in this responsibility. Ellison’s scorn for those, like Howe, who would see in Richard Wright “the archetypal and true-blue black boy” might be seen as his suspicion of a “crowing about liberty by slaves, as most men are”, in the words of Emerson quoted at the start of this paper. Freedom for Ellison, as for Emerson, is elsewhere—beyond the emphasis on type (on typology or typography, as the letter of the law) and within a conception of thought and feeling where aesthetics and the political come together. “Thought dissolves the material universe,” Emerson writes, “by carrying the mind up into a sphere where all is plastic” (Emerson, 1983, pp. 956). This is the sphere, for Ellison, in which—through the exercise of intelligence, sensibility, and imagination, aesthetic and moral—freedom might be achieved.

If the acknowledgement above of essential contributions to American culture from black experience, especially in music and dance, risked sounding condescending, any sense of this should be dispelled by Ellison’s more explicitly political formulation, a formulation that plainly takes

seriously the products of art and embraces the aesthetic as crucial to its politics: he identifies the acceptance of slavery by the founding fathers as initiating the nation's "drama of conscience" and as positioning the African-American as "keeper of the nation's sense of democratic achievement, and the human scale by which would be measured its painfully slow advance toward true equality" (Ellison, 2003, p. 778).¹⁴ This is to acknowledge contributions that are wholly other than any "paper preamble like a 'Declaration of Independence'" but vital with the breath of life.

Political beings

If the air come to our lungs, we breathe and live; if not, we die. If the light come to our eyes, we see; else not. And if truth come to our mind, we suddenly expand to its dimensions, as if we grew to worlds. We are as lawgivers; we speak for Nature; we prophesy and divine (p. 955).

Crowing about liberty involves the casual mistaking of what constitutes freedom, in what we might readily think of today as forms of bad faith. Crowing about independence might seem to be sanctioned by the hastiest, selective reading of an essay such as "Self-Reliance". Independence can be taken as a mark of American individualism, just as it is defining for the United States. A closer reading of "Self-Reliance" and of Emerson's subsequent writings makes plain his aversion to independence in its former sense, while it will be his continuing task to show the extent to which independence as a nation has not been achieved. America in this sense is still to be discovered. It has not been achieved because the society envisaged has not been realised. And, still more pressing, this has not been done because its very Constitution—so powerful a declaration for the modern world—is founded on a repression, precisely on the denial of its black population, the population from which it feeds.

It goes without saying that there is a repression also of its female population. Emerson was not insensitive to the imbalance of thought that might accompany this. When he writes, within inverted commas, "The air is full of men", this is in response to his listing of inventors whose inventions are repeated "over and over fifty times" (Emerson, 1983, pp. 951, 950). By contrast, when he speaks of the "great man", he seems to appeal for something like a feminisation of thought:

The truth is in the air, and the most impressionable brain will announce it first, but all will announce it a few minutes later. So women, as most susceptible, are the best index of the coming hour. So the great man, that is, the man most imbued with the spirit of the time, is the impressionable man, — of a fibre irritable and delicate, like iodine to light. He feels the infinitesimal attractions. His mind is righter than others, because he yields to a current so feeble as can be felt only by a needle delicately poised (p. 965).

A needle, rightly adjusted, may register the slightest fluctuations in pressure or temperature, or the subtlest tremor of the ground beneath our feet; and it may, delicately poised, separate or weave together the finest threads. Perfectionism, Cavell remarks, concerns what used to be called the state of one's soul, while, as Emerson says in "Self-Reliance", "in the history of the individual is always an account of his condition, and he knows himself to be a party to his present estate". The delicate poise of the needle will be achieved, it has been indicated, in an intimate relation to writing. It will involve a degree of disdain for the shameful state of current society. And there will be a need for the stranger to enter the city of words, where the stranger is outside that current society and where they are already within. It is a process always again to be begun.

If Goodings-Williams is right in his speculation that African-American thought may provide a "tradition less embarrassed to receive Emerson, and so less inclined to repress him", then it does indeed seem appropriate to find such a reception in Ellison's work. His partly ironic appropriation of the *Bildungsroman* is inevitably the account of a kind of education. The irony consists in the fact that, by the end of the story, and already at the beginning of the novel, all seems to have been lost. And yet this "all" turns out to be made up of things that were not generally of the importance that they seemed to be and that, in a sense, have been well lost. The strongly Wittgensteinian thread through this must be that thinking and living well will require a release from pictures that hold us captive. The Emersonian thread that intertwines will be that, in letting go, Ellison's protagonist achieves a readiness for departure – a covert preparation for more overt action.¹⁵

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¹ See Emerson, 1983, p. 471.

² Online at: http://articles.latimes.com/1993-05-23/books/bk-38605_1_seamus-heaney. Accessed on 19 December 2016. In Dante's original, the first canto of the *Inferno* runs:

Nel mezzo del cammin di nostra vita
mi ritrovai per una selva oscura
ché la diritta via era smarrita.

³ P. 473.

⁴ P. 483.

⁵ P. 487.

⁶ “With thinking we may be beside ourselves in a sane sense” (Thoreau, 1966, pp. 90),

⁷ “Our life is an apprenticeship to the truth that around every circle another can be drawn; that there is no end in nature, but every end is a beginning; that there is always another dawn risen on mid-noon, and under every deep a lower deep opens” (“Circles”, 1841, in Emerson, 1983, p. 403).

⁸ See photographs of Agnes Martin’s work at:

<https://www.bing.com/images/search?q=Agnes+Martin+Images&view=detailv2&qpv=Agnes+Martin+Images&id=AB61F23C4A9F30F51995793C30ED4744FF723612&selectedIndex=17&ccid=ECbBUt2M&simid=607987746277950576&thid=OIP.M1026c152dd8c987b7233537ecf549eb8o0&ajaxhist=0>

Accessed 19 December 2016.

⁹ “Montaigne, or, the Skeptic” is one of seven lectures in Emerson’s *Representative Men* (Emerson, 1983, pp. 690-709).

¹⁰ Both papers appear in revised form in Cavell, 2015.

¹¹ For further discussion, see Standish, 2016, and Cavell and Standish, 2012 (especially pp. 8-10 and nn. 12-16).

¹² *The Band Wagon* opens with an auction of memorabilia – the top-hat, gloves, and cane – belonging to the faded song-and-dance man played by Astaire, and then, through the huddle of reporters and red carpet that await Ava Gardner, as well as the mechanized flattery of the machines in the arcade, proceeds gently to satirize the exaggerated forms of praise, and the insignia of success, that American culture has done so much to promote.

¹³ Hannah Arendt is also criticised, especially for her “Reflections on Little Rock” (Arendt, 1959).

¹⁴ See also Gregg Crane’s astute and thought-provoking discussion in “Ellison’s Constitutional Faith” (Crane, 2005).

¹⁵ See Branka Arsić’s excellent book *On Leaving: A Reading in Emerson* (2010).