

Introduction

In “The Philosopher in American Life,” Stanley Cavell describes “a certain pathos in [his] sense of struggle for the writing of philosophy.”¹ Since it is a similar sense of this pathos that *Listening on All Sides* invokes and confronts, this situation requires perhaps fuller clarification. Cavell delineates the drama he cites this way:

Both the idea of grasping the intention of a text and the idea of sharing or hearing what has called it, are interpretations of reading, of following a text. But the idea of being intended can close out what the idea of being called and of obedience, of listening, brings into investigation: namely, how it is that one writes better than one knows (as well as worse) and that one may be understood better by someone other than oneself (as well as understood worse).²

This formidable passage, I wager, bears out the struggle to get that pathos into language. Reading this passage enacts, then, the commensurate struggle of interpretation the reader participates in if he or she commits to reckoning its meaningfulness. For Cavell such a struggle is not “merely personal,” and he insists that “the struggles it joins are nothing if not common—those between philosophy and poetry, . . . between writer or reader and language, between language and itself, between the American edifice of fantasy and the European edifice of philosophy, between the hope and the despair of writing and reading redemptively.”³ The difficulties present in this sense (and in the previous Cavell passage) play out that struggle between

hope and despair. The struggle is intrinsic to any act of reading; and in squaring Cavell's prose, one stakes a claim for what one senses the sentences mean even before arriving at that meaning. Gerald Bruns describes an underlying thematic of Cavell's writing that has broad implications: "Cavell's idea is that language is not something under our control, yet it is our responsibility, and this responsibility consists in not tuning out what is logically excessive in language, for example the sound and look of words and the way they echo and mirror one another."⁴ The literary elements of Cavell's philosophical writing indicate and express the way such writing acknowledges its attentiveness to its life in and as language. In other words, what Cavell's writing *might mean* indeed *means something* to the reader who gives it his or her attention.

The pathos Cavell invokes is, as I say, central to *Listening on All Sides*. Among the discussions of Ralph Waldo Emerson, Ludwig Wittgenstein, G. W. F. Hegel, Wallace Stevens, and others in the following chapters are a number of ratifying figures, often below the surface: Cavell (more or less explicitly) and Richard Poirier (rather implicitly) perhaps chief among them. There are some agendas to be sure, especially seen in the moments when I lobby for the importance of ordinary language philosophy and pragmatism and when I insist on facilitating a dialogue not only between Anglo-American and Continental philosophy but also between poetry and philosophy. In all, however, I claim no thoroughgoing fealty. Methodologies are ladders of sorts, things to be used and not to be used by. Although that might sound polemical, I see it more as a caution raised again and again by Emerson, a caution he wants readers to take to heart. For Emerson, reading needs to be an active proposition in order for it to count as "reading," in that only through activity does one come back to oneself. "The state of society," he writes, "is one in which the members have suffered amputation from the trunk, and strut about so many walking monsters,—a good finger, a neck, a stomach, an elbow, but never a man."⁵ Reading and writing are means of discovering one's own constitution, that which makes a self, however provisionally and contingently, a self. In Emerson's nightmare vision, the body is dismembered into its component parts. In such conditions, persons are monsters because they are not fully human. The wish to be fully human may be another kind of dream. But at the very least it seems that coming back to one's language as if for the first time is Emerson's idea of re-membering a body politic, and re-forming (in all senses) a politic's body.

The emphasis of my discussion tends to be poetics, a kind of liminal writing between philosophy or criticism and literature itself. Poetry in particular expresses indirectly the values and understanding a poet has, so looking at how poets and philosophers read these particular language acts reveals much about the ways that language is used. Heidegger suggests there are two possibilities when it comes to engaging with thinkers: either one goes to “their encounter” or one goes “counter to them.” He writes, “If we want to go to the encounter of a thinker’s thought, we must magnify still further what is great in him. Then will we enter into what is unthought in his thought. If we wish only to go counter to a thinker’s thought, this wish must have minimized beforehand what is great in him. We then shift his thought into the commonplaces of our know-it-all presumption.”⁶ *Listening on All Sides* pursues the unthought (but which is nonetheless present) in poetics and poetry and in doing so takes the literary not as special kinds of language acts but as exemplary occasions of language use. Thus, I do not look at literary influence but see poets, in their roles as exemplars, as close listeners to the words others—particularly other writers—use and how they use them. In that sense, any of us are poets, and words, thus, remain common to us all.

Chapter 1 sets the groundwork for discussing the role of ethics in reading and begins by contending knowledge is not a static body of information but is instead a measure of informed, participatory action. In “Goethe’s *Elective Affinities*,” Walter Benjamin insists, “[A]ll genuine works [of art] have their siblings in the realm of philosophy,”⁷ and this book takes that claim as a given. Poetry, in its various modalities, provides one way the conditions for interaction, or contact, can be established and maintained, can be made rhetorical and edifying, and can be open to interrogation. The interaction that exists through and as poetry and the reading of poetry ideally makes it possible to effect changes in both self and milieu.

Emerson becomes the representative figure of *Listening on All Sides* because he continually interrogates the metaphors that represent and conceptualize an objective “reality,” while remaining skeptical about the metaphor-making process.⁸ The process of negotiating literary texts dismantles certainty in order to keep open the possibility of an ethics of difference. Chapter 1 posits a pragmatist poetics that emphasizes the negotiations occurring between reading and writing and contends social and cultural values can be formed out of these efforts. In pursuing this proposition, I revisit Derrida’s discussion of J. L. Austin in *Limited Inc* and Jean-Luc Nancy’s

reworking of Heidegger in *Being Singular Plural*: I compare and contrast these texts with Wittgenstein's theories of language from *Philosophical Investigations* to establish that the conventions of language frame and delimit human imagination and subjective identity. Poetry, as the idealized expression of subjective identity, becomes a way of focusing the mind and working with structures by which acts of the imagination might lead to a constantly intensified perception, upon which community is built. The poem calls into being interpretive occasions by which both the beliefs and the whole language of the community are tested. Because these social arrangements produce and reproduce agency and subjectivity, they need to be tried out, questioned, subjected to a constructive skepticism that uses doubt and self-consciousness to discover what is necessary, what is useful, in order to create the possibilities for ethics, ethics that are ever dependent on the possibility of choosing.

In Chapter 2 I turn these questions of literature's philosophicality toward the particularities of Emerson's poetics. Looking at key essays (including "Circles," "Fate," and "Experience"), I draw out their intrinsic and generative tensions to show how they enact a constitutive skepticism. Emerson, as Nietzsche would also do, defines false boundaries by crossing them. Indeed, both writers locate their struggles in the very form that their writing takes. Lawrence Buell describes Emerson's use of the fragment as a strategic compositional move attempting to clear the ground for thinking to occur: "Of his broader aspiration, aphorism, and the aphoristic series, were telltale linguistic and syntactical marks. Emerson's partiality for aphorism was also a sign of his discontent with a narrowly belletristic understanding of what writing should be all about. Literature didn't mean just artistic play, though in some sense it was that, but also potentially scripture, philosophy, social prophecy."⁹ I would substitute for the idea of "play" the possibility of "experiment." And Buell's description of literature as "scripture, philosophy, social prophecy" stacks the deck in favor of the vatic Emerson that Harold Bloom has offered over the years. I argue against this model of Emerson in Chapter 3. Yet, as Buell implies, since no other philosopher or poet recognized the kinds of problems Emerson himself was drawn to, the Concord sage finds the conventions of both philosophic and poetic discourse available to him to be confining. Emerson is frustrated by the way that discourse—and its systematizing of reference and signification—predetermines thought and action by shaping and delimit-

ing one's relationship to the world. No single discourse can make possible the kind of agency from which or by which Emerson can address subjectivity. The agency that is available in conventional poetic and philosophical discourses lacks immediacy because of an intrinsic "impersonality." Emerson pits the two kinds of discourse against each other, as he does with various binary oppositions, through his use of aphorisms and other literary devices in order to create a generative negation of claims. I use Emerson's essays to demonstrate how this negation prompts a continual recontextualizing of terms that shifts and revises the position of the subject; such active negotiations are the means by which one invests in one's own participation in language and the community it forms. In some sense, this is the way that language and community come to be more than obligations but can be made to matter (as matter) to a person.

The complexity and textual resistance so characteristic of Emerson's texts provide pedagogical moments that call for a deepening of the reader's understanding of ethics and critique constructions of authority. For Emerson, intellectual duty has a moral dimension that gives the reader an occasion for thinking about the materials and media of thinking and subjectivity within an aesthetic as well as a sociopolitical milieu. Such reflexivity, or so goes Emerson's fast hope, makes possible an enactment of an imaginative, generative principle. Then the reader is forced to revisit and revise expectations of understanding. This understanding of Emerson sets up the terms and conditions for modernism. The difficult, modernist text gives the reader opportunities to plunge into a sea of doubt—doubt of language, doubt of the writer, self-doubt—and to broaden an understanding of the ways that language and culture do and do not work, but might given the right conditions. The act of reading and interpreting fashions a community of those who see participation in meaning—its circulations and implications—as neither settled nor transparent. The modernism I describe is not, strictly speaking, a literary period or even a codifying series of textual strategies, so the reader coming to this book seeking generic taxonomies, academic exegeses, and literary histories is apt to be frustrated. Instead, the term as I situate it describes something a bit broader: it is a stance, a worldview, that brings together skepticism and a commitment to finding a way of going on, of continuing with a kind of attentiveness, a responsiveness, that might call one again and again to the world as it is. Cavell might call this "living one's skepticism";¹⁰ I believe this to be the condition of living the

modernism wherein and whereby we find ourselves. This is to make modernism not only a literary proposition but a philosophical one as well.

Investigating the implications of calling Emerson a philosopher, I argue in Chapter 3 that he is better thought of as a theorist, which creates an indeterminate position for his writing. The reader engages the production of textual meaning by negotiating this indeterminacy and establishing its parameters. I show how Emerson arrives at a constitutive skepticism that compels him to critique the vocabulary he inherits from history, art, and politics. Emerson's poetics indicates his commitment to reporting the experience of being a self, in all its contradictions and complexities, and for him literary texts make language the site and the citation of that struggle. The text for Emerson is the scene where the agon between recognition of an individual's chosen values and the values one inherits ideologically is enacted, not only for the writer but for the reader as well.

Having established the ways that Emerson's work both calls for and enacts textual and authorial self-consciousness, I bring these theories to bear on Emerson's contemporaries, Melville and Hawthorne. I look at the rhetorical devices in Melville's essay "Hawthorne and His Mosses" and argue that his self-conscious reading practices raise issues about how the authority of an author is established and legitimated. Moreover, I illustrate how Melville constructs Hawthorne in a way that authorizes American literature through a dialectical self-consciousness. By means of this theoretical performance, Melville re-creates himself (by way of a pseudonym) as a fictive author of the essay and so blurs the boundaries of subject and object through a critical discourse that seeks to invent and establish itself by engaging the dialectics of another writer's text. "Hawthorne and His Mosses," by deconstructing the authority of the author (by turns, Melville, Hawthorne, and the fictive critic), attempts to democratize the interpretive process and open it to include culture, ideology, and history. My reading of Melville's text draws on a close discussion of Kojève's work regarding Hegel, especially in regard to the latter's description of the master/slave dialectic. Kojève's focus on the mechanisms of prestige and what he takes to be a necessary—even definitively human—desire for recognition and acknowledgment by one's equals is central not only to his reading of Hegel but to his sense of why a subject needs continually to engage and confront the Other. This model of identity as a calculus of desire and resistance to the Other is necessary in order to situate the ethical dynamic in Melville's

poetics within a broader philosophical tradition. The Other (in Melville's case, Hawthorne) is the figure from which and even against which we draw the language to name ourselves within a world.

Chapter 4 focuses on the interrelated efforts of Stevens and Williams, whose poetics are, each in its own way, enactments of alternative democratic processes. In discussing the problems of poetic composition these two poets faced, I argue that metaphor and form become matters of ethics as well as aesthetics. Reading these two poets alongside one another, I show they both see America as a culture in constant need of understanding the terms and conditions of language because it is a nation caught simultaneously between the conflicting worldviews of transcendentalism and pragmatism. In a discussion of major works by both poets (including *Paterson* and "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction"), I indicate that the democratic investments of Williams and Stevens are to be found in the pedagogical models posed by the semantic, cultural, and ethical difficulties within their work as well as in each poet's engagement with cultural institutions and mores. Their poetics necessitates that readers deepen their mastery of the tools and conditions of language and meaningfulness in order to engage the poems.

My discussion of Stevens focuses on his aphorisms and his late poems to show how they seek to resituate the social and epistemological functions of art and poetry in the absence of theology. Without the superstructure of a belief in God, a new means of investing in one's world is made necessary. Poetry becomes a replacement for God, as in its negotiations a poem's text is both the creation of a worldview and the way one writes (or reads) oneself into that world by means of poetry's acts of creative, constitutive imagination. In these efforts of Stevens's, there are meaningful links to be drawn between his idea of language as being in a fallen state and that offered by Walter Benjamin. Both writers, I argue, suggest that literature has a moral dimension whereby one must work to grasp the concepts and metaphors that exist in such literary texts, deepening a mastery of language, culture, and figuration.

Moving to Williams, who similarly sought to refresh the possibilities of a democratic, participatory "ordinary language," I show how the poet attempts to establish poetry and poetics as alternatives to the logic of a market economy that assesses work as a means to an end, rather than as an end in and of itself. Williams and Stevens therefore situate poetry within an Emersonian mode whose complexities emphasize the need for literary

and social imagination to seek out and determine new systems of valuation, aesthetics, and semantics. In the opening of *Paterson* Williams acknowledges with a fraught combination of hope and resignation, “For the beginning / is assuredly the end—since we know nothing pure / and simple beyond / our own complexities.”¹¹ Williams emphasizes a need for clearing the ground of what came before, not out of some nihilistic impulse but as a means of restarting possibilities of invested, flexible beliefs. I locate Williams in terms of Dewey’s pragmatism in order to discuss how Williams’s poetics tries out language in its commitment to both present (in the sense of making present) and represent experience. For Williams, poetry is an activity that moves toward commitment and cohesion by constantly pressing the limits of principles of order, form, and composition.

For writers in the Emersonian mode—a conscious and tactical self-consciousness—poetry constitutes acts of language upon language. In the self-conscious poetics of writers like Dickinson and Williams, Whitman and Stevens, Cavell and Emerson, Stein and Nietzsche, Heidegger and Hegel, writing remains in a perpetual conversation with itself as well as with its reader. This conversation becomes both the ground for and call to an ethics of reading. The wager then is that what changes when one listens for such conversation is not reading or modernism or ethics. Rather, it becomes evident that what first must change is one’s stance toward such things. Changing one’s stance starts with finding that where one stands is both a beginning and an end intertwined with our own disconsolate, our own redemptive complexities, a place we cannot hope to get beyond and that yet lies everywhere still to be discovered.