

Rethinking democracy and education with Stanley Cavell *Repensando la democracia y la educación con Stanley Cavell*

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ABSTRACT: Stanley Cavell is a Harvard philosopher who, in writings spanning half a century has consistently returned to themes of education. Yet his writings are never programmatic, and he has never presumed to give advice to policy-makers or practitioners. He is interested in education as a critical dimension of human life. He shows how the autonomy of the individual is not to be separated from her role as a citizen. Understanding this requires attention to the criteria that sustain human practices and the development of judgement in relation to them. In philosophy and in ordinary life, this raises the question of scepticism, and Cavell's distinctive response to this, which links its manifestation in philosophy with literature and tragedy, and with aspects of ordinary human existence, is especially original. Cavell never writes in a technical way or in jargon, but his language makes significant demands on the reader, encouraging them to read with a new attentiveness: this itself is of pedagogical importance. The present discussion takes up these themes and relates them to crucial questions regarding the education of teachers.

Key words: Stanley Cavell; scepticism; United States; education; criteria; judgement; objectivity; Thoreau.

RESUMEN: Stanley Cavell es un filósofo de Harvard que a lo largo de una obra que se extiende a lo largo de medio siglo se ha detenido de manera consistente en temas educativos. Y ello, a pesar de que sus trabajos no responden a un programa prediseñado y que nunca ha pretendido dar consejo a políticos o educadores. Le interesa la educación en la medida que es una dimensión crítica de la vida humana. Muestra cómo la autonomía del individuo no debe entenderse separada de su papel como ciudadano. Entender esto, supone prestar atención a los criterios que sustentan las prácticas humanas y el desarrollo de un juicio sobre las mismas. Tanto en el ámbito de la filosofía como en el de la vida cotidiana, esto plantea el problema del escepticismo. Lo distintivo de la respuesta ofrecida por Cavell a dicho problema, y que resulta especialmente original, es que en ella une su expresión filosófica con la literatura y la tragedia así como con aspectos de la existencia humana ordinaria. Cavell nunca escribe de un modo técnico o empleando ningún tipo de argot, pero su lenguaje plantea desafíos importantes al lector, animándolo a leer prestando un tipo nuevo de atención: esto es, en sí mismo, pedagógicamente relevante. El presente trabajo recoge todos estos temas y los relaciona con cuestiones cruciales relativas a la formación de los profesores.

Palabras clave: Stanley Cavell; escepticismo; Estados Unidos; educación; criterios; juicio; objetividad; Thoreau.

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Introduction

Educational policy faces its recurrent crises, though these emerge, under the pressures of political and social instability, in points of anxiety that are articulated in ways that subtly change. Thus, today one finds journals and publishers' lists full with entries on citizenship, moral education, happiness and wellbeing, and inclusion; meanwhile, and given a new accent by PISA, the perennial concern to «raise standards»—whether over levels of literacy or over attainment in mathematics and science—becomes *de rigueur* in the discourse of school administrators, no less than in the speeches of politicians. Meanwhile, the economic crisis that has reverberated around the world since the recession, felt more keenly in Spain than in most European countries, raises questions about who is contributing to the economy (and how), as well as about who rightfully belongs to this community (and why); and such questions are never far from latent nationalist or patriotic demands that expose the proprieties of good citizenship to pressures of a more troubling kind. Our democracies, always fragile and ever vulnerable to distortion, are tested in new ways.

Yet, for all its earnestness, educational research yields results that often disappoint, and one can be forgiven for having the feeling at times that arguments are circulating and positions being upheld to no great avail. Moreover, to the extent that such research conceives of itself as empirical social science, it is unlikely directly to address the questions that matter most here. Why?—because these are ultimately questions about value and justification, about how a just society is to be conceived. They are questions about what matters most in a human life. Such matters cannot be pursued through empirical research, however much this may tell us about what people happen to think. Ultimately they require reflection and argument. While in a sense, in respect of these, we all stand on an equal footing, there is no doubt that it makes sense to pursue them in the light of ideas that have come down to us through the centuries, ideas that themselves have been tested through exposure to discussion and debate. It is through engagement with these that we can test and sharpen our own views. And it is in virtue of this that, within educational research, philosophy has a special importance. In a sense enquiry of this kind is unavoidable, though for sure we find ways to evade it, by deferring to the views of others or by deceiving ourselves into thinking that research data will somehow answer these questions for us.

So what kind of basis does this provide for attending to the thought of Stanley Cavell (1926-)? After all, he is a Harvard philosopher who has never presumed to give advice to educational policy-makers or practitioners. And after all, there are many other philosophers, including those working directly in the philosophy of education, who have written on these matters. No less a philosopher

than John Dewey has written explicitly and more or less programmatically about education. So why turn to Cavell? What is distinctive about what he has to say?

It would be convenient at this point if I could introduce Cavell by placing him within a particular school of thought—perhaps as a pragmatist or a post-structuralist. But Cavell has never been a follower of a school; neither does he seek to found one. Any such label would fail to do justice to the distinctiveness of his philosophical engagement and of the demands this makes on the reader. For there is no doubt that Cavell's approach is such as to prompt the reader to think for herself.

This is evident, first, at the level of style. His writings are difficult in ways that are difficult to name. It is not that he writes in a specialised jargon or in the received vocabulary of any particular scholarly tradition, and it is not that his writing is philosophically technical: if it had been complex in these ways, then perhaps this would have encouraged a certain kind of following, with adepts eager to show their proficiency in the master's words, and a reputation would have been more easily won. It is rather that his texts challenge the reader to *read*: this cannot be a process of simply assimilating the substance of what is said, as if the main points could be noted and incorporated into an existing framework of judgements, for the force of the writing is to cause the reader to reappraise her relation to the words in use. The complacency that can beset us when we hold too confidently to our positions is thereby challenged. Hence, his attention to the form of expression is far from a concern with stylistic embellishment. The style is inseparable from the substance of what he has to say: it is an endorsement of the refusal of conformity and the commitment to self-reliance that he inherits from the great 19th Century American essayist, Ralph Waldo Emerson. Refusal of conformity and self-reliance are virtues needed in a democracy, but they need some explanation. These surely are *political* virtues. This is not to speak primarily of party politics but of the problematics raised in the opening paragraph above, concerning the moral standing of the human being as a citizen in a democracy in crisis, and concerning the educational standards this might imply.

I shall shortly have something to say about the more substantive ways in which Cavell's thought has purchase on these most salient problems, but first let us consider some significant features of the content of his work.

Anyone coming to his work for the first time might do well to embark on a little book he wrote at the beginning of the 1970s, *The Senses of Walden*. As the title implies, this is a kind of commentary on the 19th Century classic, *Walden*, Henri David Thoreau's record of the period of some twenty months when he went to live in the woods, by the side of Walden Pond, outside Concord, Massachusetts. The book records his building of the wooden hut he lived in, the planting of his bean-field, and the way he lived. The popular understanding of

this book is that it represents Thoreau's *escape* to the woods, and he is imagined sometimes to be someone who is getting away from society in order to seek solitude and communion with nature. But Thoreau's purpose is not escape. He builds his hut about a mile from his neighbours, which is to imply that the life he is to live there is seen by them: he experiment in living is at the same time a challenge to them, exposing the «false necessities» by which they live. And the book is an oblique examination of what is wrong with the society he has found himself in, in aid of the discovery of a better economy of living. Like an Old Testament prophet, Thoreau writes in order to wake his readers up!

Thoreau wrote the book at a time when America was struggling with itself over the war in Mexico; Cavell wrote *The Senses of Walden* in an intense period of six weeks in the summer of 1971, when America was tearing itself apart of the Vietnam War, then nearing its dreadful denouement. Reference to war in both books is oblique, but in some respects this conditions the issues that are foregrounded. Each book traces major themes in philosophy, and this is done in an idiom that is practical and everyday, not abstract and scholarly. Moreover, the relative familiarity of *Walden* makes *The Senses* a fine entry into Cavell's writing: it presents in microcosm themes and concerns that pervade his work as a whole. There is no obvious first step in the understanding of Cavell's work, so why not start, as it were, in the midst of the woods?

Scepticism, criteria, and judgement

The most sustained theme in Cavell's philosophical work as a whole is the engagement with scepticism. Although not explicit in *Walden*, this is a theme that underlies the «experiment in living» that is that book's concern. Scepticism is to be understood first and foremost in philosophy, and specifically in Anglophone philosophy, in the light of the concern to find a secure basis for knowledge claims. Indeed this is what has characterised epistemology over the past four centuries, especially, that is, since Descartes. Cavell's interest was shaped particularly by his encounter, in the 1950s, with the «ordinary language philosophy» of J.L. Austin and with the writings of the later Wittgenstein. The latter's *Philosophical Investigations* has been widely read as an attempt to refute the sceptic—that is, to show that the sceptic's questions (Is this a table in front of me? Are there other minds? How do I know that I exist?) always presuppose a background in which, in effect, these items of doubt are taken for granted. In epistemological terms, then, these sceptical questions involve a kind of circularity, with the conclusions of enquiry embedded in the premises. Cavell's reading of Wittgenstein, however, finds rather more to be at stake here, and in the process it exposes the inadequacy

of the idea that scepticism is hereby *refuted*. It is not so much that this is wrong as that it misses the point. A key point of emphasis that Cavell will develop is that the sceptic's questions can only be raised where there is a suppression or repression or denial of the background. As these terms indicate, and as his subsequent writings richly show, this resonates with forms of denial to which human beings are peculiarly prone. Cavell develops the theme of denial in terms of the failure not so much of knowledge as of acknowledgement, the burden of which is examined especially in his writings on literature, particularly Shakespeare, and on the Hollywood films of the 1930s and 1940s, the principal focus of his attention in this respect being genres that he identifies as the «Hollywood comedy of remarriage» and the «Hollywood melodrama of the unknown woman»¹.

That the *Investigations* is something other than an epistemological refutation can be seen, as Cavell eloquently shows, in the way that Wittgenstein «dissolves» the problem only to allow it to start up again—and this Wittgenstein does repeatedly. The itch returns. The question will not go away. This is tantamount to an acknowledgement not of the truth of scepticism but of the truth *in* scepticism; and this is, as it were, not an epistemological but an existential truth. It testifies to something deep in the human condition: our compulsion to doubt; our inclination to demand a greater reassurance than the circumstances allow or a more robust verification than they could reasonably bear; and, as Cavell—attending to the mild deflation of the Wittgensteinian claim that explanation must come to an end somewhere, that there must be an end to justification in acknowledgement of our «form of life», and hence in acceptance that ultimately «This is what we do»—as Cavell nicely puts it, our disappointment in criteria.

Scepticism has its characteristic contemporary manifestation in education in contemporary assessment regimes. This is not in any way to doubt the importance of assessment, but it is to take issue with the reductive behaviouristic approach that currently prevails. Two aspects of this are to be noted. First, it tends to be assumed that where there is no measured behavioural outcome, there is no learning. What is real is what is transparently open to view and measurable. This in turn feeds a conception of teaching that is excessively programmed and even mechanistic: the good teacher has clear objectives, and these are made transparent to the students at the start; everything that takes place in the lesson or in the course is geared towards the effective realisation of pre-determined ends, and any deviation from this—say, any spontaneity—is unwarranted. Yet this runs counter to the accumulated judgement of most experienced teachers,

¹ Cavell takes the following films from the 1930s and 1940s, films in which remarriage may mean the rebirth of a marriage, as defining for the genre «the comedy of remarriage»: *It Happened One Night* (1934), *The Awful Truth* (1937), *Bringing Up Baby* (1938), *His Girl Friday* (1940), *The Philadelphia Story* (1940), *The Lady Eve* (1941) and *Adam's Rib* (1941) (see Cavell, 1981, 2004). Defining films for «the Hollywood melodrama of the unknown woman» are: *Letter from an Unknown Woman* (1948), *Gaslight* (1944), *Now, Voyager* (1942), and *Stella Dallas* (1937) (see Cavell, 1996, 2004).

whose interaction with their students gives them some sense of what has been learned and what has not in a way that is not only fine-grained and nuanced but also sensitive to the very contexts that faith in large-scale systematic testing inevitably overrides. What is at issue here is partly the nature of objectivity. Where numbers can be computed on a comparative basis, there must, it is supposed, be objectivity. But this is scientific and pedagogically naïve: it combines the problems of, first, diverting teaching and learning from what matters most in educational terms and, second, indulging in a metaphysical fantasy involving the reification of values to which numbers are attached. Indeed it masks the kind of attention that is needed on the part of teachers if learning is to have a more realistic basis. Most good teachers know this, though the legitimacy of their knowledge is thus denied. It blocks the expectation that newcomers to the profession can and should develop understanding of this kind. It turns teachers into technicians.

A further, related feature of contemporary education is the revision of the idea of a criterion, and once again this smacks of scientism. In many countries, and in an unprecedented way, the word «criteria» has become a part of the teacher's habitual vocabulary, but the term is understood in such a fashion as to involve dangerous distortion: criteria are envisioned as items on a check-list, and often these are imagined in binary terms—either the criterion is met, or it is not. They are typically assumed to have a quasi-technical function, to be applicable in specialised circumstances. In Anglophone contexts one can now find elementary school children wondering if they have «met the criteria for a task» (that is, using vocabulary that would never normally be part of the discourse of a child).

This narrowing and distortion of the notion of a criterion hides the fact—a further failure of acknowledgement—that criteria are there in all human practices. Even something as seemingly natural and everyday as sitting on a chair involves standards of appropriateness: this is something we learn to do—probably not through explicit lessons but through having our body guided in various ways or perhaps being given the right tip or the occasional reprimand («Sit up straight,» «Don't put your feet on the seats,» etc.). What this helps to show is how, for the most part, the criteria by which we do things appropriately are woven into our practices and do not require explicit formulation. This applies even (and in an especially important way) at the level of the words we use. In complex practices such as the learning of a subject in school, it is appropriate for certain criteria to be made explicit at times, but these typically presuppose a wealth of background that is, or comes to be, implicit. Furthermore, even where criteria are made explicit, the rigidity of the specification is often related inversely to their pedagogical legitimacy. There is rarely a role for straightforward measurement, as where one measures the length of a piece of wood. So while rigid specifications may be easier to apply, they are less likely to reflect appropriately the educational values

that are at stake. Intelligent specifications of criteria typically stand in need of interpretation, and hence we are back with the need for the judgement developed from experience that the seasoned school-teacher typically possesses. To be clear, this is not to accredit the teacher with mysterious powers: her ability to exercise judgement should have been honed not only in her initial teacher education but in the course of her professional practice, where it is exercised against the background of the judgements of others; and it should continue to be exposed in this way, such that she is at times required to defend her criteria, not through appeal to a measure but through accounting for and arguing in defence of the judgements she is inclined to make. Teacher education, initial and continuing, should then be committed to this progressive refinement of judgements. And this requires the maintenance of an ethos of trust between teachers and of those communities of practice that enable such dispositions to develop. To be sure, this also implies continuities of employment for teachers and freedom from the turbulence engendered by excessive policy innovations and interventions on the part of those who are over-anxious to make their managerial mark. This would yield a more rigorous and objective assessment regime, and acknowledgement of the necessity of this would engender a professional confidence that is otherwise denied.

But let us be clear: these considerations are not pertinent only to practices of formal assessment; they concern the multiple ways in which teachers must exercise judgement – in interpreting the behaviour and responses of learners, in deciding how and when to intervene, in timing the structure and pace of their presentations, in conversations of multiple kinds, in deciding what to teach. They coalesce in what can reasonably be thought of as professional practical reason. In important respects these are not narrowly circumscribed, technical skills. They are abilities and dispositions of the kind that we all exercise in some degree in everyday life, but in the good teacher they are refined, refocused, and more intensely committed to specifically educational ends.

Return to the ordinary

Part of Wittgenstein's purpose is, in effect, to show the diverse ways that criteria operate in the variety of our practices. The opening pages of *The Claim of Reason*, Cavell's master-work from 1979, are devoted to a painstaking and explicit examination of the notion of a criterion. This preoccupation is evident throughout the work of both thinkers. Wittgenstein speaks of the need to undo the knots that develop in our thinking, where these are knots for which philosophy has often been responsible. But philosophy is not an isolated academic discipline. We can see this if we take as an example the influence of logical positivism, the philosophical position developed especially by members of the

Vienna Circle in the 1920s and 1930s. It is easy to trace the ways that its doctrine of verificationism—that is, the empiricist idea that the truth of a proposition is to be understood reductively in terms of its means of verification—has found its way into contemporary educational behaviourism (that is, as we saw, in the idea that where there is no measured behavioural outcome, there is no learning). This influence is there and in the wider world notwithstanding the fact that no-one in philosophy is a logical positivist now! The untying of these knots, sometimes requiring movements more elaborate and more difficult than those that constructed them, is part of the «therapy» of philosophy that Wittgenstein seeks to provide. In doing this he repeatedly returns philosophy to the ordinary. In the flights of philosophy to which the sceptic is drawn, language goes «on holiday», he claims—that is, it ceases to do any real work, to have any purchase on the world. And this suggests, at a different level, the kind of ineffectuality that Thoreau sees in the lives of his neighbours, for all their ostensible busyness. (Think of the *educational* ineffectiveness of the prevalent performativity, and think of our contemporary busyness!) When this happens, in philosophical scepticism or in the obsessions of performativity, our thinking spins on ice and can make no progress; it needs to be returned to the rough ground, against which it can gain purchase. In the successful return to the ordinary (say, in a renewed faith in the judgement of the teacher), it is not that we achieve a resolution of our doubts; it is rather that we are, for a time, relieved of the compulsion to raise them, and hence that we know how to go on.

It is part of Cavell's position, however, that the emphasis on the therapeutic can be overplayed or misconstrued. That Wittgenstein speaks of finding peace from the sceptic's persistent anxieties, he argues, and yet worries away at these doubts again and again not only testifies to but dramatises something inherent in the human condition. It reveals the way that to return to the ordinary in a manner that does not hide from human experience is not to return nostalgically to a simple world in which all somehow made sense but to find an economy of living that incorporates and acknowledges this fragility and disturbance—our seeming compulsion to call into question the circumstances of our ordinary lives. In other words, let us not imagine any easy exemption from these difficulties, for that would be to encourage a further kind of denial. Hence, let us not imagine that we can be immune from the inherent anxiety in teaching and learning. Think for a moment of the anxiety that attaches to grading students' work, or think of our recurrent doubts about what to teach and how to teach it. It is no wonder that many are tempted by «objective testing» or by research based on randomised control trials as means to provide educational practice with a purportedly more secure basis. But the fantasy that we might settle these things once for all is tantamount to a denial of the human condition.

A part of the economy of living that is adumbrated by these writers will involve a proper appreciation of the various things we do with language. In the so-called «ordinary language philosophy» of J.L. Austin, this is elaborated in terms, for example, of the distinction between the «constative» and «performative» functions of language—that is, the distinction, respectively, between «She made a promise to him» and «I promise», where the latter statement, in contrast to the former, does not describe the promise but is itself the act. Austin is at pains to demonstrate this performative force of language, which he finds to be not just a characteristic of a limited class of terms (promising, the naming of ships, the making of vows in the wedding ceremony, etc.) but a dimension of language more generally: we do things with words². In spite of Austin's largely dismissive attitude to Wittgenstein, his procedures and purposes are not so far removed, priority being given to the piecemeal study of particular examples of usage or segments of experience, a procedure that is itself a principled defiance of the pressure in philosophy towards larger metaphysical claims. Like Wittgenstein, Austin returns words from their metaphysical to their everyday use, a return demonstrated in various ways, so Cavell will claim, in *Walden* itself.

Cavell is struck especially by the way that the characteristic procedures of the ordinary language philosopher, the characteristic mode of appeal, takes the form of «When we say . . . , we mean. . . ». For example, in a celebrated exchange between Austin and Gilbert Ryle, the distinction between what is voluntary and what is involuntary is at issue. Thus, the structure «When we say that an action is involuntary, we mean that. . . » would characterise the approach that the parties to this discussion would typically adopt. This is not to imply that this is a special technical method: rather it reflects the kinds of conversations that human beings typically have when their relation to their words is in one way or another at issue. The question goes beyond the kind of difference over meaning that a dictionary could simply settle. It is an appeal to ordinary use not as some kind of empirical generalisation about the behaviour of a particular people—a survey of usage would be beside the point: it is an appeal to the ear, to what sounds right and why. Two things should be noted especially: the statement is first person, and it is plural. That it is first person shows the significance of voice; the authentication of the statement has to do with the speaker's sincere assent, with how things seem to her, and with her desire or responsibility to express this. That it is plural testifies to her desire or responsibility to speak *for* others, to find community of some kind with them. This is by no means to impose on their views, nor is it simply to align herself with them in terms, say, of shared characteristics (a

² His work in this respect has had immense influence, not only in Anglophone philosophy but in the poststructuralism of Jacques Derrida and Jean-François Lyotard, the development of the idea of the performative nature of race and gender in, for example, the work of Judith Butler being an important derivative from this.

community of the same); it is rather to offer her assertion as exemplary in some way, testing this against the responses of others, and testing her own responses against what those others themselves say. Here again then we find an iteration of the idea of the development and refinement of judgement, sketched earlier in relation to teacher education.

That this relation to others does not spring from a fully-fledged personal autonomy—of self-contained egos, individualistically calculating their involvements with the world, their contingent connections with others—is evident in the importance that is attached, as we saw, to reading: reading is a metonym for the ways in which our responses are drawn out and tested in the words of others. It points to the salience of reception. This then is to see a person's autonomy as inevitably tied to the political (the creation of the *polis*)—as two sides, so it might be said, of the same coin—and to see it as inextricably tied to the conditions of response within which she finds herself. The political is to this extent internal, and our relation to our words conditions political participation. While these are themes that pervade Cavell's work, he elaborates them in explicit terms in *The Claim of Reason* (1979) and develops aspects of them especially in his later writings on Emerson (1989, 2003, 2004). But it is clear that he finds them also in Thoreau, and in *The Senses of Walden* they are revealed with particular subtlety, where questions of reading and writing are never far from the surface of the text. Thoreau's hoeing of his bean-field—cutting and dividing, setting in order, inseminating the earth—doubles as a metaphor for the marks he makes on the page, where both are modes of cultivation. Thoreau goes so far as to say that we need not only to acquire our mother tongue but to come again to our relation to language, as if with a new discovery, a new birth. He refers to this in terms of the acquisition of the «father-tongue», a reengagement with language, which where our accustomed, unreflective use of our language is, as it were slowed down, where we are brought back to our words in order to think again (Thoreau, 1992, pp. 68-69). In a subversion of the idea of the «common school», which might figure as offering a kind of consolidated socialization, Thoreau claims that we need «uncommon schools», by which he envisages not so much the creation of a new type of institution but the acceptance of our ongoing need to reappraise our relation to our thought and words (Standish, 2005). This implies, furthermore, a rejection of those forms of fixity, or even fixation, to which our habitual use of words is apt to succumb.

Cavell's recognition that our words condition our being in these ways explains not only the profound impact that ordinary language philosophy has had on his thought but his acute sensibility to the language of the texts he reads, a sensibility manifest also in his own distinctive style. As was indicated above, this is a style that is rarely technical but that remains receptive to the language's

resources and whose idiom shifts seamlessly between high culture and the colloquial, embracing Shakespeare opera, and film, as well as baseball, jazz, and jokes. This openness to the culture, with its crossing of boundaries, may produce texts some have found to fall short of philosophical decorum, but it implies a wider reception of thought, a hostility to philosophy's self-containment, whose consequences extend to what democracy and education can be.

America, democracy, and moral perfectionism

Cavell's return to Emerson and Thoreau at different stages in his career, which in effect reiterates his stance towards scepticism, is motivated partly by his sense that these writers have in some ways been disparaged by the culture from which they came, the culture that they helped to shape—specifically that they have been disparaged by philosophy (that is, by established, institutionalised philosophy) as non-philosophical. This he sees as a particular kind (and maybe a characteristically American kind) of repression or denial. It is surely significant then that *The Senses of Walden* was written at a time when American identity, or what America represents, was exposed, as we saw, in an especially painful way—during the later stages of the war in Vietnam. Perhaps like Jacques Derrida's *Specters of Marx*, written defiantly against the backdrop of triumphalism over the demise of communism and the «end of history», *The Senses* is also an «untimely» book—that is, a book that expresses thoughts that are out of step with prevailing opinion, ideas that people are not ready to hear. Cavell focuses philosophically on a philosophical work that has come to be denied, on something of America's culture that has been repressed, and reads this in a way that challenges both what has become the conventional reception and celebration of this work, with its convenient placement for some within the genre of the pastoral, and institutionalised perceptions of what philosophy can be. He reads it as a book about politics and education, and about what has gone wrong with the American dream: allusions to the visceral precision of Thoreau's remarks regarding the Mexican war leave little doubt as to Cavell's concerns about American encroachments on East Asia, while the Eastern influences acknowledged in *Walden*—its references to Buddhist stories and to the *Bhagavad Gita*, for example—reflect a hospitality to thought that America has learned to deny. It is in this respect that America has still not been discovered: its reality is a travesty of the ideas that inspired it. But this points for all of us also to the idea of democracy as still to come: that is, to the dangers of complacency and to the task that democracy necessarily must remain, especially at a time when hospitality to the stranger, to the outsider or the asylum seeker, risks being obliterated under the pressure of our understandable anxieties about who rightfully belongs to this community (and why).

If one aspect of the pastoral reading of *Walden* has the beneficial effect of showing the possibility of an ecology or environmentalism that would resist the plundering and destructive consequences of booming industry and commerce (its capitalism), this falls well short of the broader terms in which Thoreau seeks a different economy of living. For this would require not only a different relation to the land but a different incarnation of work and rest, of the ways that we house ourselves and our relation to our neighbours, of our connections at home and abroad, of death and birth, and of settlement and departure. The economy of living at issue here is an economy of the words we use and of the thoughts and practices that they condition. These concerns are perhaps most explicitly played out in Cavell's writings on Emerson, where the repression referred to above has also perhaps led to an under-appreciation of the extent to which Emerson's work was influential for Nietzsche. More recently Cavell has written of what it is concerning the relation of land and belonging that separates Thoreau from Heidegger (Cavell, 2005). For all the differences between these thinkers, it is difficult to believe that Thoreau's experiment in living and in writing—and hence, in building, dwelling, and thinking (Heidegger's *Bauen Wohnen Denken*)—did not influence Heidegger, unacknowledged though that influence may remain. But the conclusions these thinkers come to are in the end profoundly different. Heidegger's wooden cabin, in the forests of south-west Germany, represents his most profound sense of belonging to the land; the hut in the woods that Thoreau builds, by contrast, is a place for a temporary sojourn. He leaves the woods for the same reason he went there: it is time to try something new, to renew the experiment that a life lived well must be. This endorses a qualified kind of nomadism and lighter, more provisional forms of belonging and identity.

Cavell has coined the phrase «**Emersonian moral perfectionism**»—a perfectionism without final perfectibility—to capture a loose set of features, all related to a kind of cultural conversion, which he draws together along the following lines.

Each self is drawn on a journey of ascent . . . to a further state of that self, where . . . 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 . . . the imagination of a transformation of society into . . . something like an aristocracy where . . . what is best for society is a model for and is modeled on what is best for the individual soul. . . (Cavell, 1990, p. 7).

Far from any crude individualism, this suggests aspiration towards our own best selves, where selves are not simply given but to be found, continually as new possibilities in the course of our lives. What is aspired to is typically understood in terms of a new reality—the good city, the good society. It involves thinking how our world should be constituted, what words we can find for

it, what practices should give it substance, and what standards sustain it; it involves questioning what America might be. That the question of America, of its creation and inauguration, its promise of democracy, is never far from the preoccupations of *Walden* is made plain enough by the fact that Thoreau began to build his house on the 4th July.

As may have become clear from the above remarks, Cavell sees a close relation between philosophy and what it is to live a human life, and hence between philosophy and education. As he puts this in *The Claim of Reason*, «In the face of the questions posed in Augustine, Luther, Rousseau, Thoreau..., we are children; we do not know how to go on with them, what ground we may occupy. In this light, philosophy becomes the education of grownups» (Cavell, 1979, p. 125). The confessional and autobiographical forms of writing exemplified in these classic texts, and the kinds of reading Cavell leads us towards, imply processes of self-discovery that are a far cry from the narcissistic forms that have become prevalent in the culture of therapy and in educational practice today³. It is no surprise then that he finds *Walden* itself, a book that Thoreau wrote for «poor» students, to be profoundly relevant for education; it is a book to be placed alongside Rousseau's *Emile*. Moreover, the recurrence of themes of turning and departure, here and in his readings of Emerson and other texts, also place this text thematically in relation to Plato's *The Republic*, especially with regard to its myth of the Cave and the imperative of turning towards the light, away from the flickering images that the darkness offers. Contemporary shadows on the wall of the Cave are to be found in those advertising and media representations with which our experience is saturated, as well as in fantasy worlds, so heavily marketed, that can be held even in children's hands. To be sure the role of reading is not confined to literary or philosophical texts: education in reading the plethora of signs that construct our world is an imperative of high importance.

This helps to explain more fully Cavell's faith in the educational value of cinema. Indeed it is to the films that he saw as he was growing up that he attributes a major part of his own education. The title of Cavell's 2004 text *Cities of Words: Pedagogical Letters on the Moral Life*, with its echoes of Plato, Augustine, and Schiller, and its sense of the interrelatedness of language, literature, and education. The book intercalates chapters on great philosophers with chapters on films. These are typically Hollywood «talkies», which means, of course, that they foreground conversation. Their central character, usually a woman, is trying to find her own voice, retrieving it from its suppression, typically by a man. The themes and tone of Emersonian moral perfectionism are worked out in Cavell's depiction of the endless perfecting of the central characters and the others with

³ I suggest that narcissism is to be found in some conceptions of personal and social education, in debased notions of reflective practice, and in the preoccupation with happiness in schools.

whom they converse through a kind of mutual education. Education is then seen to be inseparable from the finding of one's voice. Yet this is something other than one finds in contemporary affirmations of «student voice». **Drawing its significance** from the recognition within philosophy of the particular importance of first-person utterance (as we saw above in connection with Austin but which is also emphasised by both Kierkegaard and Wittgenstein), and from the sense that I must stand behind, or be present in, my words (in a manner that is not remote from Foucault's late writings and the notion of *parrhesia* or *franc parler*), the nature of the emphasis on voice is exemplified in *A Pitch of Philosophy: Autobiographical Exercises* (1994) and the substantial memoir, *Little Did I Know* (2010). Recognising this significance of the voice involves coming to see that we are confronted less by a set of problems to be solved once-and-for-all than by an obligation to be addressed continually, day-by-day. It is in what we say that we are called to account for ourselves. This is particularly pertinent to our lives as teachers and learners. Without a sense of this obligation, our words go dead on us, and the responsibility we bear for this is not only personal but political.

This begins to reveal the ways in which Cavell's sense of the common and the communal cuts across familiar dichotomisations of liberalism and communitarianism. The impulse here is something other than a political developmentalism or politics of recognition, expressed perhaps as «**mutual respect**» or «**learning from difference.**» Cavell says there is no society before individuation (Cavell, *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome*, 1990): self-reliance and the orientation towards the other coexist as a paradox, the very condition of human being. This is not a matter, contra Rawls, of the adjustment of conflicting interests. Rawls' thought-experiment is premised on the possibility that we conceive of a society so arranged that our part in it would be above reproach. Cavell's aversion to such a thought is indicative of the way that he is drawn recurrently to a vocabulary of sin and redemption. This is not likely to be understood within familiar ideals of autonomy or care-ethics. For similar reasons it is important to emphasise that his work disrupts dichotomies of subject and object, or inner and outer, the hardening of which causes so much confusion in research in education. Emersonian perfectionism is there too in conversation with others, perhaps with the friend who does not passively nod in agreement or bring consolation, but who confronts us with our own shame (including, that is, our shame at the degraded state of our democracy) and challenges us continually to a next, best possibility of ourselves. Conversation of this kind, exposure to this ongoing education, is crucial to the recovery of political emotion and the release from cynicism. This must be a part of our education as grownups (Saito and Standish, 2012).

I noted at the start of this discussion the kinds of preoccupation that currently characterise much educational research—with questions of citizenship,

moral education, and happiness and wellbeing to the fore, and with the recurrent commitment to raising standards. My discussion of Cavell and Thoreau has worked its way back and forth across these matters but in a form of discourse that challenges the ways they are commonly articulated. This difference in discourse is no mere incidental matter, for what is at stake in these different vocabularies is precisely the avenues of thought that are open to us, concerning human lives and politics, and criteria and judgement. These matters will come to light only in limited ways if the discourse in which they are articulated is not disturbed.

My discussion has alluded at times to the more sombre, sometimes ambiguous messages that attach to the politics of inclusion. As a closing remark, let me mention a feature of contemporary research in education that is of some salience here. The internationalisation of the climate of research harbours potential threats but also offers an opportunity. The threat has to do with a homogenisation fuelled by the hegemony of English, especially in circumstances of policy-borrowing (and especially where this tends to be one-way). This world language is, however, not in fact any form of standard English but, as Malcolm Bradbury long ago observed, English-as-a-foreign language. Perhaps English has always had some propensity to become a language of utility, but it seems likely that, with the dominance of this somewhat depleted version, technical and functional forms will prevail, perhaps of the kind that was once idealised in Esperanto or Volapük. But while such a simplification may be unproblematic in subjects that are themselves technical, in the case of research in education it is likely that much will be obscured, including those features of good educational practice that this paper has tried to bring to the fore. Indeed there is the likelihood that this curtailment of the language will propel, or seem to legitimate, a further technicisation in the conception of education itself.

Internationalisation opens new possibilities, however, where there is a sensitisation to language difference, of inter- and intra-lingual kinds. Hence, the effects of translation need to be foregrounded, such that the differing resources of languages are shown to open possibilities of thought that would otherwise be denied. In this respect, it is no coincidence that the literary resources of a writer like Cavell present special challenges for the translator, as they do for the reader who is not a native English-speaker. But these difficulties are openings to thought. «The truth is translated,» Thoreau goes so far as to say; «its literal monument alone remains» (Thoreau, 1992, p. 217). Such a sensitisation, of language and thought, would contribute well to realising the different possibilities of democracy and education that are expressed in the writings of Stanley Cavell. It follows that it is incumbent on native speakers of English, who are perhaps now as much as ever inclined to be complacent in their monolingualism, to attend more carefully to languages from another shore.

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