

In Quest of the Ordinary: Lines of Skepticism and Romanticism, by Stanley Cavell. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988. xiii, 200pp. \$19.95.

This is a collection based on lectures given between 1981 and 1987, including Cavell's Tanner lecture. All except "The Philosopher in American Life" have been printed elsewhere. The essays contain and omit just what one expects. Cavell uses Emerson as a facilitator of his ongoing conversations with Wittgenstein and Heidegger, finds Emerson a place with the founders of British romantic thought in reconstituting the ordinary (Wordsworth and especially Coleridge's "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" make prominent appearances), and acknowledges commonalities in Emerson's and Shakespeare's skepticisms of intimacy. Cavell makes no attempt to relate Emerson to other American philosophers except Thoreau. William James makes one brief appearance (p. 105) despite similar concerns with skepticism.

These essays continue Cavell's interpretation of Emerson and skepticism begun in The Senses of Walden and The Claim of Reason. And he views This New Yet Unapproachable America, (Albuquerque: Living Batch Press, 1989) as a companion volume. In America, Emerson's essential philosophical view is: "At each step, or level, explanation comes to an end; there is no level to which all explanations come, at which all end. An American might see this as taking the open road. The philosopher as the hobo of thought (p. 116)."

This passage occurs immediately after an explanation of how Wittgenstein and Heidegger were necessary for a philosophical appreciation of Emerson. But while Heidegger used Hamsun's hobo August as an example of "the uprooted modern man who can do everything equally well yet who cannot lose his ties to the extra-ordinary" ("The Fundamental Question of Metaphysics"), this rootless life is to be avoided. For Cavell, the hobo captures the truth in skepticism as a way of life which is the human condition.

It is Cavell's view that the post-Nature Emerson took skepticism to be unsolvable yet placed it in the heart of his thinking (Quest p. 79). In his earlier work, Cavell has written that Emerson sees us in a state of romance with the universe:

. . . we do not possess it, but our life is to return to it in ever-widening circles.... The universe is what constantly and obediently answers to our conceptions. It is what can be all the ways we know it to be, which is to say, all the ways we can be (Walden p. 128).

The truth of skepticism is that existence is to be acknowledged. We do not know the existence of the world with certainty, yet our relation to its existence is deeper, accepted, received (p. 133). Unlike Heidegger, Emerson and Thoreau see the achievement of the human in abandonment, leaving.

significance of leaving lies in its discovery that you

have settled something, that you have felt enthusiastically what there is to abandon yourself to, that you can treat the others there are as those to whom the inhabitation of the world can now be left (p. 138).

For Cavell, transcendentalism is what romanticism became in America. Ordinary language philosophy and transcendentalism are not arguments against skepticism, but responses. They contest with common sense for the right to claim the ordinary. Our claims about the existence of other people or the external world are not beliefs, but expressions of feelings that constitute our worlds (Quest p. 4). The acceptance of skepticism means that: "An irreducible region of our unhappiness is natural to us but at the same time unnatural. Skepticism is as live in us as, let me say, the child." (p. 9)

It is the foundation of Thoreau's quiet desperation, of Emerson's melancholy. Our true home slips away:

The everyday is ordinary because, after all, it is our habit, or habitat; but since that very inhabitation is from time to time perceptible to us - we who have constructed it - as extraordinary, we conceive that someplace elsewhere, or this place otherwise constructed, must be what is ordinary to us, must be what romantics...call home. (p. 9)

In "The Philosopher in American Life", Cavell treats skepticism as the central secular place in which the human wish to deny the human condition is expressed. Philosophy does not defeat skepticism but nurtures it for constant recovery and refounding of philosophy in a reconfigured everydayness. Cavell pictures us as linguistic creatures whose criteria settle speech acts, but are open to repudiation. We embrace skepticism, but suppress it. The price of nonsuppression is that we lose our ability to count, to order, to be in one way rather than another (p. 87). Here, he endorses Wittgenstein's philosophy of the everyday, replacing Emerson's ascent to the Over Soul with a descent to our common language (pp. 46, 117).

The kinship of philosophy and poetry is in their common attempt to overcome the death of the world which we carry within us through reinvigoration of the ordinary (pp. 44-45). Kant's bargain, buying back knowledge but losing the world, is unacceptable to romantics. But the answer provided by romantic poetry is philosophically unacceptable also, embracing as it does animism or the pathetic fallacy (pp. 52-53, 65). So, what is the philosophical solution?

All attempts at refutation extend skepticism. True recovery lies in reconceiving skepticism, in finding its source. The skeptic engages in a failure of acknowledgement, despairing to risk in the absence of an unconditional ground (p. 80). If we fail to risk in the face of skepticism, we babble like Othello. This is the true import of Emerson's complaint that we no longer

dare to say "I think" and achieve at least momentary existence. So we haunt the world.

Emerson's philosophical progress is a fresh answer to Descartes. We must say, state, and enact our existence. The peculiar Emersonian twist is that commitment comes through intuition, in exalting whim (pp. 114-115). And Cavell also realizes the temptation of skepticism: "it names our wish to strip ourselves of having to mean one thing or one way, rather than another."

Still we are hoboes:

...in Walden the proof that what you have found you have made your own, your home, is that you are free to leave it. Walden begins and ends with statements of departure from Walden (p. 175).

I liked the reconstitution of the skeptic as a hobo. Although Emerson and Thoreau were daoists when it came to travel, the hobo is especially true to Sextus's characterization of the skeptic as one who continues to inquire but accepts appearances in the meantime. My one complaint is that Cavell does not carry out the reformulation of the basis of skepticism. This is where James, Peirce, Clifford, and Dewey could be brought into his discussion. Cavell could certainly choose another tradition to approach the task he sets for himself, perhaps Schopenhauer will fit the bill. For now he has embraced an aesthetic sensibility which animates our world until we are ready to move on from it and leave it to others. Maybe that is the Emersonian price of freedom. Limited skepticism allows us to embrace edification and avoid commitment.

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Post-Analytic Philosophy, ed. John Rajchman and Cornell West, New York: Columbia University Press, 1985. XXX plus 275 pp.

Once upon a time this book was to herald a new movement in American philosophy. This new movement was a break with analytic philosophy and a new beginning -- post-analytic philosophy, or a return -- neo-pragmatism. There are fourteen essays in this volume (including the introductory essay by one editor, John Rajchman, and an afterward by the other, Cornell West) organized into four sections (Introduction, Literary Culture, Science, and Moral Theory). Most of the essays have been previously published. Many of the authors have moved beyond the strictly analytic philosophy of their training and early work, thereby embodying in their own work this sense of a transition to a new sort of philosophy. These include Hilary Putnam, Thomas Nagel and one Richard Rorty.

I was thinking about this book at the time of the 1993 SAAP meeting in Nashville, and have thought a great deal about it