

Ed Cutler  
Brigham Young University

Abstract Title:

“Romantic Philosophy Beyond Concord: Absolute Idealism and Walt Whitman’s *Leaves of Grass*”

Abstract:

Scholars have long recognized an affinity between Walt Whitman’s poetics and German Idealist philosophy. Typically, however, their view of Whitman’s philosophical understanding has not been very flattering. In most commentaries Whitman appears as the superficial appropriator of weighty philosophical concepts, usually Hegelian, acquired second-hand from popular translations and commentaries. Moreover, biographers and critics have tended to portray the philosophical underpinnings of *Leaves of Grass* as, in large measure, the appropriation of an earlier appropriation - that is, as Whitman’s sampling of New England Transcendentalism, which itself had drawn inspiration from the works of Goethe, Schiller, Fichte, Hegel and other late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century German philosophers. Whitman’s reverence for Emerson, his evident familiarity with Carlyle’s commentaries on German philosophy, and the posthumously uncovered evidence such as his “Sunday Evening Lectures” (Whitman’s summative sketch of German idealist philosophy) might well appear to support the commonplace view of Whitman’s thought as derivative.

Stanley Cavell’s Emerson ostensibly fits this picture. In Cavell’s reading, Emerson established a mode of expression in which “philosophy and literature would bear a relation to one another not envisioned in the given, outstanding traditions of philosophy in England and in Germany” (*Emerson’s Transcendental Etudes* 4). Yet Cavell follows this observation with a curious qualification: “Or, if it were said that this relation was in fact precisely envisioned in the movement called romanticism, both in England . . . and, more fervently and permanently, in Germany (in the Schlegels and Tieck, and in Novalis and Hölderlin . . .) it would have to be added that in both standing traditions the development of literary practice unfolded in the presence of, in a process of withstanding, established philosophy.”

My paper aims to flesh out the implications of Cavell’s aside. To understand the development of romantic philosophy in America - a story more varied and complex than the synthetic genius of Emerson alone - we must first recognize that mid-19th-century American literature extended the implications of romanticism on several fronts, and with some degree of independence. Whitman’s *Leaves*, in fact, could be argued to bear the most direct relation - in concept and expressive mode - to the Jena romantics Cavell allusively recognizes as having inaugurated a mode of expressive philosophy. The absolute idealism of early German romanticism - which in fact provided Hegel much of the framework for his later philosophical system - appeared in its time an obscure, dangerously uncritical follow-up to Kant’s more methodologically rigorous, carefully limited idealism. Only in the twentieth century has the critical prescience of Jena romanticism come fully to light; it is evident in such disparate critical extensions as Walter Benjamin’s romanticization of dialectical materialism and Martin Heidegger’s turn to poetics and language as the ground of being.