

Corey McCall
Elmira College

Abstract Title:

"Redeeming American Thought through its Unsettling: Cavell's Reading of Emerson

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This paper proposes to show how Cavell raises the question of the uncomfortable role of American philosophy in American cultural life through the example of Emerson. This paper examines the strange cultural dynamic that Cavell discerns in the American reception of Emerson as exemplary of this redemptive movement. Emerson, Cavell argues, offers America paradoxically an anti-foundationalist (and hence resolutely anti-metaphysical) founding that occurs through the repression of the works of Emerson within the culture at large.

Cavell attempts to redeem Emerson as a philosopher drawn on the duality he finds manifest in Emerson's thought, as the epigraph from Cavell's *Cities of Words* makes clear: "I know that the world I converse with in the cities and in the farms, is not the world I think." Cavell understands this Emersonian sentiment as a parsing of Kant's well-known dualism in *The Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*: To be human is to be condemned to a dualism in which reason will remain forever dissatisfied, yearning for a freedom that can never be adequately proven. However, Emerson transforms this Kantian epistemological into a political yearning. Cavell is fond of citing Emerson's passage "Every word they say chagrins us;" in Cavell's hands, this statement exemplifies the disgust Emerson feels in the face of the prevailing culture of conformity. Modern philosophy, Simon Critchley has written, begins in disappointment. Emerson's question is whether this disappointment simply signals the end of a tradition or heralds a new beginning as well.

For Cavell, philosophy's need for redemption stems from the Romantic interpretation of Kant, who conceived of the individual as straddled between two worlds, that of Reason and the Understanding. As a result modern humans are at home neither in the unfettered realm of reason nor in the law-governed realm of the scientific understanding, and nineteenth century philosophy is in large measure an attempt to either acknowledge or rectify the fact of this homelessness. Cavell reads American thinkers as attempting to respond to this fact, especially those writers whose reputation he most seeks to redeem, Emerson and Thoreau. Cavell sees Emerson as responding to this all-too-human plight described by Kant

It is precisely because thinkers such as Emerson and Thoreau are repressed by American culture at large that they can serve as representative American thinkers, representative of our better selves, what we might yet become if we can but remember the origins of American thought in the very thought that "everything they say chagrins us," the thought that I must choose whether or not to consent to present conditions, and if I choose not to do so, I must proceed without the consolation of any predetermined ideal. Cavell leaves us with the idea of the self intertwined with the idea of America, neither given but both unsettled, tasks whose outcome can never be preordained.