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Abstract Title:

Stanley Cavell, "Aversive Thinking," and Emerson's "Party of the Future"

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Stanley Cavell describes Emerson's "aversive thinking" as an enactment of a "particular disdain for official culture." The dynamic of this form of dissent is of importance in understanding Emerson's complex negotiations of individual self-expression and ethical responsibility in the politically turbulent 1840s. For Emerson and other New England transcendentalists, translating aversive thinking into a more explicitly political form of discourse became a central task. In his "Lectures on the Times" Emerson offered a perspective on the U.S. political scene that, in Cavellian terms, attempts to mold the aversive stance into a more positive principle of social perfectionism. Cavell argues that the perfectionist ethic does not divorce the individual from society and its norms and claims, but renews the claim of citizenship. Emerson criticizes the American democracy of the 1840s, but offers a prospect of a more fully achieved democracy in the "party of the future," those forever dissatisfied with the actual realization of a perfected justice. Cavell's recognition of the dual nature of Emersonian "aversion," a turning away from society and a turning back to it in a differently imagined form, illumines the political turn that the transcendentalists made in the 1840s, and clarifies the connection between individual ethical choice and larger political responsibility in modern culture.