

Finding Perfect Pitch: Reading Perfectionist Narrative with Stanley Cavell

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INTRODUCTION

Speak your latent conviction, and it shall be the universal sense: for the inmost in due time becomes the outmost, — and our first thought is rendered back to us by the trumpets of the Last Judgment.¹

So says Ralph Waldo Emerson. The creation of the “great man” — one who can sustain independence even in the midst of the crowd — is perhaps the obvious thesis of Emerson’s “Self-Reliance.”² And although this is surely a courageous and heartening call to trust in ourselves, an immediate, popular reaction can be expected: Is this not too strong? Is this not too egocentric a notion of the self to be defensible today? Writing in defense of Emerson, and as an acknowledged authority in Emerson studies, Lawrence Buell responds: “the ‘mineness’ of what’s avowed... is justified by its ‘impersonal’ character”; and “the ‘I’ of the passage is not the mundanely autobiographical ‘I.’”³ The point in contestation here is whether, and how, this personal emphasis in Emerson’s account of the self can be justified. In response to prevalent criticism of the Emersonian self on the grounds of its excessive emphasis on the personal side of individualism, Buell argues that the personal in Emerson is underwritten by *impersonality* and *depersonalization*. An implication of Buell’s view is that the underlying drive in Emerson’s account of the self is negative: it is an avoidance of the personal. However, is this the only way of responding to Emerson’s call for people to become self-reliant?

The purpose of this essay is to explore an alternative possibility for reading this contested passage of Emerson, a reading that takes issue with the limited frames of both the prevailing criticism and the defense. In education broadly understood, and in the various claims that are made for “narrative” with respect to education, emphasis on the “real me” and the “inward turn” to the self have burgeoned.⁴ A similar autobiographical trend is no less prevalent in educational research.⁵ Yet, when it comes to schooling in the context of these nihilistic times, with their crisis of the loss of voice, education for the self-reliant individual seems urgent. This is an education for speaking in one’s own voice — that is, an education without falling into narcissistic self-containment; it is an education for turning the voice of the “I” outward toward a becoming-community that is hospitable to strangers, allowing space for the inaudible and marginal voice to be acknowledged — that is, an education without narratives of self-serving recognition. In responding to this urgency, the negative approach to reading Emerson does not seem adequate. The task for the philosophy of education is then to offer a critical framework for rethinking language and the self in order to bridge the personal and the public.

This essay suggests one possibility of such a discourse for education through a reinterpretation of Emerson that centers on the theme of the education of the

self-reliant person, from the inmost to the outmost. A helpful lens through which to view what is at stake here is Stanley Cavell's idea of "Emersonian moral perfectionism." In his antifoundationalist approach to perfectionism, Cavell destabilizes the way we conventionally conceive of the self. He envisions a potential path from the private to the public, showing the aesthetic and the existential to be preconditions for our political becoming.

Cavell's picture of the Emersonian self destabilizes any notion of the "real me": the self is not negative, but affirmative, in the spirit of Friedrich Nietzsche. To tap the potential of Emersonian perfectionism and to find a way beyond its *aporiai*, I shall explore its intersection with Cavell's studies of film. In particular, the genre he identifies as the Hollywood melodrama of the unknown woman — exemplified by the film *Stella Dallas*⁶ — is examined as a "perfectionist narrative," with "prophetic language" being highlighted as one of its key features. This analysis will help to destabilize perceptions of the self and of the self's relation to language, and will show why the apparently paradoxical concept of antifoundationalist perfectionism is necessary in the passage from the inmost to the outmost. In conclusion, I shall claim that Cavell's ideas can serve as a critical corrective to the popular discourse in narrative education and political education: its alternative vision of education can awaken the individual to find "perfect pitch" in her own voice.

EMERSONIAN MORAL PERFECTIONISM

Cavell's approach to Emerson's thought is driven by the following question: Why has Emerson been appropriated within the American cultural heritage and thereby repressed in philosophy? In resistance to the dominant voice of Anglo-American analytical philosophy, Cavell reclaims Emersonian moral perfectionism as an authentic philosophy, of which America should be proud.⁷ From the outset, Cavell's reading of Emerson involves questions of voice — "what produces that perpetual air of understanding and not understanding, insight and obscurity"⁸ — and issues of its stealing, deprivation, suppression, and then its recovery.⁹ And his philosophical task is educational, concerning how one can *learn* to read and hear this inaudible voice again.

Emersonian moral perfectionism helps us re-see what "from the inmost to the outmost" might mean. It is provocative in the following senses. First, as *Emersonian* (and, by implication, American) perfectionism, it is distinguished from traditional strains of Western perfectionism. Unlike the teleological forms of Plato's and Aristotle's perfectionism, Emerson's perfectionism is *ateleological*, or, in Cavell's words, "goalless."¹⁰ Perhaps the most distinctively Emersonian aspect of this perfectionism is the idea that "the self is always attained, as well as *to be* attained,"¹¹ and that "the human self... is always becoming, as on a journey, always partially in a further state" (*CW*, 26). The reader of Emerson is challenged, then, to perceive this "perpetual moral aspiration to an 'unattained but attainable self'" (*CW*, 247).

Second, Emersonian *moral* perfectionism requires a reconsideration of what it means to be moral: morality hinges not on theoretical justifications (such as Kantianism and utilitarianism), but on words (that is, how we say what we mean) —

an idea that echoes Cavell's ordinary language philosophy. Cavell quotes from Emerson: "every word they say chagrins us and we know not where to begin to set them right" (*CW*, 24). Re-possession of language, re-turning it to the language community, is participation in the "city of words." It is this idea of speaking for oneself that adds a *narrative* dimension to the moral life featured in Emersonian perfectionism. Finding one's voice is inseparable from an existential "claiming [one's] right to exist, [one's] standing in a moral world" (*CW*, 50, 260).

Third, the self that is oriented toward perfection must "speak with necessity" and "stand for humanity" (*CW*, 31–32). "My" voice is my own, and yet it is not just "mine": it is already implicated in the words of others. Cavell hears in Emerson a Kantian call for speaking with a "universal voice" (*CW*, 31). This also reflects the political, and more specifically, the democratic, facet of Cavell's ordinary language philosophy — an idea of "myself and my society being in conversation, demanding a voice in each other" (*CW*, 68). This is an idea of "assent," as Paul Standish explains: "something like membership in a polis, a common world in which judgments are shared, in which (together) we find things the same, in which we project things (together)."¹² The nature of the voice that the "I" speaks must be particular, and yet universal.

But two *aporiai* persist. The first *aporia* is to be found in the paradoxical aspects of *antifoundationalist* perfectionism. How far is it possible to maintain the idea of perfection as goalless? More specifically, what does it mean to say that "each state of the self is, so to speak, final"¹³ The second *aporia* is concerned with the dual nature of the self, with its being both personal (partial) and universal (impartial). Cavell contends that the main difference between Emerson's and Immanuel Kant's conceptions of the self lies in the former's refusal of "selflessness," or "the absence of self" — a position that is derived from Kant's idea of a "noumenal self" (a "true self"). In Emersonian perfectionism, the "partiality" of the self should be retained throughout the passage from the inmost to the outmost.¹⁴ But how is it possible then to sustain both particularity (and hence, partiality) and universality at the same time? To address these *aporiai* more fully, it is necessary to pay closer attention not only to what Emerson says about the self, but also to *how* he says it.

READING PERFECTIONIST NARRATIVE: PHILOSOPHY MEETS FILM STUDIES EMERSONIAN MORAL PERFECTIONISM AND THE STUDY OF FILM

The manner of reading that Cavell adopts in his approach to film can guide us in addressing the *aporiai* of Emersonian moral perfectionism (*CW*, 27). One of his most recent books, *Cities of Words*, makes explicit the connection. Cavell's interdisciplinary dialogue between philosophy and film criticism elucidates what is at stake in our search for the "good" life — for what it is that is moral about the path of perfection.

Taking film to be "some kind of art, some site of the transmutation of public and private into and out of each other" (*CW*, 41), Cavell discusses a number of Hollywood films from the 1930s and 1940s, which he groups together under the title of "the melodrama of the unknown woman."¹⁵ In these stories, Cavell follows the thread of

a woman's education both inside and outside marriage, centering on the process of her rediscovery of her lost voice. It is in the context of film that Cavell identifies Emersonian perfectionism as "the province not of those who oppose justice and benevolent calculation, but of those who feel left out of their sway, who feel indeed that most people have been left, or leave themselves out, of their sway" — a condition of what Emerson calls "secret melancholy," and what Henry David Thoreau calls "quiet desperation" (*CW*, 25). It is also a distinctive feature of Cavell's account that human emotions such as "hatred and anger" are not treated as irrational, but as conditions of thinking (*CW*, 25–26). *Moral* perfectionism "takes its rise," he says, out of the "crisis" in life (*CW*, 29). It is not moral if it gets "no foothold with you" (*CW*, 94). The life of marriage in these films is thoroughly private, and it is the site of conversation and mutual education between man and woman. Challenging the treatment of film as simply a matter of private aestheticism, Cavell claims that "serious art...make[s] public matters private" (*CW*, 41).

Reading perfectionist narratives in film, then, shows how "a mutual criticism of marriage and society" can take place (*CW*, 53). To understand this, we need to consider further the centrality of perfectionist narrative to Cavell's identification of this genre of film. Reading Cavell, however, is challenging. As Hilary Putnam says: "To read Cavell as he should be read is to enter into a conversation with him, one in which your entire sensibility and his are involved, and not only your mind and his mind."¹⁶ To be true to Cavell's way of reading and to his view of language, the reading of film should not be seen as an exercise in the shoring up of one's position, but as a site for "revealing" oneself (*CW*, 49). Cavell himself does not read in order to uncover a formula, any more than he expects his readers to overcome the impasses in Emersonian perfectionism. Rather, his reading requires our attunement to the conversation of film, without superseding it. As he says:

To understand the events of a film you have to see what is there, what goes without saying, how each person is where he and she is, why the camera is, and the light is, where they are, questioning what is happening while they create what is happening, between the lines, said as they are forever said, with that tone, look, tempo, pause, evanescence. (*CW*, 116)

The reader is asked for her "perfectionist perceptions of the way we live," and to offer her "imagination and conversation" (*CW*, 251, 254). In other words, it is our experience of undergoing the perfectionist moments in the film that *reveals* it as the perfectionist narrative. To do so, we are asked to be attentive to the "continuous air of something unsaid, unheard, unseen" in the medium of exchange (*CW*, 264). A film is thus a site for cultivating aesthetic perception.

CAVELL'S READING OF *STELLA DALLAS*

Let us see *how* Cavell says what he says, and how this destabilizes our conventional reading, through the example of *Stella Dallas*. This film presents the story of a woman, Stella Dallas, who aspires to be educated through marriage, through the relationship it brings and the life this opens up, but whose anticipation is betrayed by her husband, Stephen, and who eventually chooses to find her way outside of marriage, by leaving home. A further key feature of the story is Stella's

relationship with her daughter, Laurel, and with Stephen's new partner, Mrs. Morrison. It is through these alternative relationships that Stella comes to find her way, ironically by leaving her daughter with Stephen and Mrs. Morrison (*CW*, 265–270).¹⁷

Stella Dallas is typically interpreted as the story of a self-sacrificing mother who displaces herself for the sake of the social advancement of her daughter. In the final scene, where Laurel's wedding is taking place in Mrs. Morrison's affluent home, Stella stands outside with a crowd and watches through the window. Then she walks away, turning her back to the happy house, simultaneously walking toward the audience, with a satisfying smile. Cavell contests Linda Williams's feminist interpretation of the film, which claims that the final moment of the film "resolves" the "contraction of Stella's attempt to be a woman and a mother by eradicating both."¹⁸ "Contesting tears" and resisting Williams's negative interpretation of Stella's "self-sacrifice" and "self-oblivion," Cavell takes the story to represent instead "self-liberation and self-empowering, epitomized precisely as the claiming of a face."¹⁹

Cavell's reading of *Stella Dallas* is an endeavor to rethink philosophy and morality in the light of Emersonian moral perfectionism. This effort is guided by three interrelated questions: How does Stella make herself "intelligible" to the world (*CW*, 263)? Where does she, in her subjectivity, (learn to) *stand* in society; how is she to "become the one you are" (*CW*, 247)? And "which comes first, conformity or its aversion" (*CW*, 22)? We are not expected to find definitive answers; rather, we are invited, as it were indirectly, to find words ourselves to recount the story, and to experience it as perfectionist narrative.

In questioning the meaning of "intelligibility," and in relation to a scene where Stella has dressed ostentatiously, advertising her difference from the members of the affluent country club where her daughter is being coached at tennis, Cavell says, "Stella must know exactly what her effect is there" (*CW*, 273). He sheds light on the role of "Stella's taste" in her judging of the world. She is represented as a woman who "learns the futility of appealing to the taste of those who have no taste for her," who can read "the distaste of those for whom she knows she is distasteful," but who still dares to express her taste in public (*CW*, 274). Taste here is not simply preference of a private kind; rather, it is the awareness of one's taste ("a right to our own desires"), and its expressions are "touchstones for social criticism" (*CW*, 97). By putting her words (and her clothes) on trial in public, Stella responds to her own "sense of her discovering language, giving herself words" (*CW*, 260). In contrast to Kant's moral imperative, Cavell finds Emerson's morality to emphasize "duties to oneself" (*CW*, 254) — that is, a duty toward the "attaining of a self that is mine to become, the power to act on behalf of an attainable world I can actually desire" (*CW*, 33). For Stella, remembering her taste — expressing her desire and, hence, sustaining her partiality — is the condition of becoming public. The *universal* force of her words is manifested both in her speech and in her act of *aversion* from a world that she finds to be a "place of illusion" (*CW*, 275), and hence a place to leave.

Another question then rings in our ears: “Which comes first, conformity or its aversion?” Cavell’s answer will be: “There is no first.”²⁰ Stella tests her words and behavior in the eyes of community, and what is returned to her as a result is “public disapproval” (CW, 274). Cavell raises a parallel question regarding Emerson: “Is Emerson’s struggle against conformity then a struggle for dissent?” His answer again is neither yes nor no (CW, 69). In short, aversion is impossible without conformity, and dissent is impossible without consent. Stella’s acceptance of public disapproval illustrates the point of “getting the private and the public sides of her life to affirm each other” (CW, 79).

If, however, as Cavell contends, *Stella Dallas* is the story of a woman who liberates herself, the idea of public disapproval sounds like too negative of an outcome. What “benefit” is there to this disapproval, if any (CW, 274)? In response, Cavell shifts our attention to the ending of the story, the very moment of Stella’s *walking away* into the darkness from the radiant scene of her daughter’s wedding (CW, 278). His reading does not guide us to a settled conclusion, any more than Stella is guided to a final destination. If a moral task of Emersonian perfectionism requires the woman to find “where she is to be at home in the world” (CW, 280), the answer that Stella offers is to “exile herself from that world” (CW, 255).

Departure and goallessness do not, however, mean that Stella has no direction. Cavell asks what she “walks toward” (CW, 278). To answer, he raises the idea of the “mother’s gaze.” Cavell turns our gaze at the screen away from fixation, inviting instead another possibility: Stella’s own search for the mother’s gaze (CW, 279). He overturns the relationship between mother and daughter, between seer and seen, and suggests that Stella seeks the mother’s gaze; she seeks to be seen by both Laurel and Mrs. Morrison — seeking, as it were, affirmation from them. It is not that Stella comes fully to understand who she is and what her role is. The search for the mother’s gaze is something that eternally escapes our full grasp, showing the pointlessness of trying to identify a woman as *mother, daughter, lover*, and so forth.

In sum, what Stella learns from her relationships with Stephen, Laurel, and Mrs. Morrison is “the pain of individuation” (CW, 278). And this is also what Stella has taught Laurel: “to cause her to cry over separation, as for a solace preceding one’s own happiness, not replacing it” (CW, 280). Cavell’s rereading of *Stella Dallas* illustrates the fact that an episode in perfectionist narrative is not geared toward mutual understanding or any kind of conversion: its drive is not toward knowledge or even toward recognition, exactly, but rather toward *acknowledgment* — specifically, the acknowledgment of separation and individuation as the inevitable fate of being human. Cavell’s perfectionist reading educates us as readers to use words we already share, enjoying the “happy possibility” of sharing (CW, 277), and yet accepting the impossibility of full sharing.

FINDING A PERFECT PITCH

There is one ray of possibility that somewhere you could learn to think and to speak again, then leave that world to find that place. (CW, 252)

The reader of Cavell’s text, if perceptive to his words, can encounter occasions where her subjectivity is confronted *now* with a crisis in her life, and where her

judgment, her words, are tested *here* and *now*. This parallels Emerson's idiosyncratic vocabulary of "aversion" and the idea of "turning" that Cavell associates with "Emerson's picture of thinking" (*CW*, 36), just as it parallels Stella's final act of walking away, turning her gaze from the window to the screen, at the very moment of conversion from "mourning" to "morning" (*CW*, 278). To "read a film" — to read the text of someone's life — involves this intensive attention to the moment of crisis. Without attesting to such crucial moments, the perfectionist narrative is not revealed.

Cavell's reading of *Stella Dallas* also expresses a crucial factor in Emersonian moral perfectionism: Stella does not walk away because she knows fully where she should go, and she does not walk away because she is now "proving her existence" (*CW*, 281). More straightforwardly, she does not gain her "moral standing in the world" because she has found her true self, or identified in herself the "real me" (which Cavell calls a "debased form of perfectionism") (*CW*, 248). What she has come to realize instead is a way of life in which "she has allowed herself not to have a self, or to claim self, at all" (*CW*, 261). The implication of her final act of walking away can never be revealed if it is read in terms either of problem solving or of moral justification. Her turning away is better captured as a prophetic moment — where what might be called "prophetic language" is expressed when Stella is still "in partial darkness to herself" (perhaps forever so). Prophetic language is a manifestation of Emerson's "Whim" — call it Stella's taste. For Emerson, whim is something that he hopes to find to be "better than whim at last";²¹ and as Cavell says, "Emersonian Whim is anything but equivalent to the Kantian inclination or incentive" (*CW*, 253). When, in our lives, the force of "universal moral law" loses its purchase, and when we need to start within uncertainty, it is Whim we must resort to, but only as the beginning. In Emerson's passage "from the inmost to the outmost," the ground of universality is not given beforehand, and there is no guarantee that it will be finally achieved; rather, universality lies in the power of prophecy, as something that is to be tested and revealed on the way. Emerson's maxim of "speaking with necessity" is an invitation to trust one's whim, with a hope that "with a small alteration of its structure, the world might be taken a small step — a half step — toward perfection."²² Here, prophetic language is something entitled only to the person who can stand on the critical border of the attained and unattained (but attainable) self. Finding such critical language is an aesthetic experience; it is a matter of finding "perfect pitch."²³

The perspective of prophetic language helps us understand why Emersonian moral perfectionism is crucial to reviewing and re-relating ourselves to the dominant discourses of education, discourses that blind us to the manifestation of that prophetic power, and hence desensitize us to the pitches of our own voices. It challenges the idea of a "coherent narrative self."²⁴ Emersonian perfectionist narrative is also to be distinguished from reader-oriented views on reading (whether in "postmodernism" or in reader-response theory),²⁵ and from the relativism associated with these views. In Cavell's conceptions of language, the self and language are always in conflict, putting each other on trial, and helping each other to regain autonomy.²⁶ Furthermore, much as Emersonian perfectionism resists the myth of the

true self, it equally resists both the lure of mystification of the unknown and, worse, a resignation of language in the name of silence. Nor is perfectionist narrative a matter of “linguistic play”: in Emersonian perfectionism, the loss of the force of prophetic language results in the enfeebling of public life. Despair, Cavell says, is to be seen as a “political emotion” (CW, 98), and “personal crisis” as a momentum for “social projection” (CW, 251). In contrast to the political language of mutual recognition, mutual understanding, and social inclusion — which is sometimes the camouflage of a foundationalist drive that blinds us to the fluid and the uncertain, and, therefore, to the prophetic nature of both the self and language — Cavell’s way is more indirect, seeking to achieve the political from within the possibility of the aesthetic, to regain “democratic aspiration” (CW, 78). Yet, equally, it refuses to fall into the aestheticization of the political. With all these implications, Cavell transfigures the role of philosophy “as education of grownups”²⁷ — where education is the continual search along the passage from the inmost to the outmost, along the bridge from the private to the public.

1. Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Ralph Waldo Emerson*, ed. Richard Poirier (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), 131.

2. *Ibid.*, 135.

3. Lawrence Buell, *Emerson* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2000), 169, 236.

4. Paul Smeyers, Richard Smith, and Paul Standish, *The Therapy of Education: Philosophy, Happiness and Personal Growth* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 9.

5. *Ibid.*, 56–57.

6. *Stella Dallas*, DVD, directed by King Vidor (1937; Century City, Calif.: MGM Home Entertainment, 2005).

7. Stanley Cavell, *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome: The Constitution of Emersonian Perfectionism* (LaSalle, Ill.: Open Court, 1990).

8. Stanley Cavell, *Cities of Words: Pedagogical Letters on a Register of the Moral Life* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2004), 22. This work will be cited as CW in the text for all subsequent references.

9. Stanley Cavell, *A Pitch of Philosophy: Autobiographical Exercises* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1994).

10. Cavell, *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome*, xxxiv.

11. *Ibid.*, 12.

12. Paul Standish, “In Her Own Voice: Convention, Conversion, Criteria,” *Educational Philosophy and Theory* 36, no. 1 (2004), 94.

13. Cavell, *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome*, 3.

14. *Ibid.*, xxxiv.

15. Stanley Cavell, *Contesting Tears: The Hollywood Melodrama of the Unknown Woman* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996).

16. Hilary Putnam, “Philosophy as the Education of Grownups: Stanley Cavell and Skepticism,” in *Reading Cavell*, eds. Alice Crary and Sanford Shieh (London: Routledge, 2005), 117.

17. Standish, “In Her Own Voice,” 96–98.

18. Lynda Williams, “Something Else Besides a Mother: Stella Dallas and the Maternal Melodrama,” in *Home Is Where the Heart is: Studies in Melodrama*, ed. Christine Gledhill (London: British Film Institute, 1987), 314.

19. Cavell, *Contesting Tears*, 36.
20. Stanley Cavell, "Walden in Tokyo" (paper presented at a colloquium on Cavell's work, Harvard University, Cambridge, Mass., October 2006).
21. Emerson, *Ralph Waldo Emerson*, 134.
22. Cavell, *A Pitch of Philosophy*, 50.
23. *Ibid.*, 30, 48.
24. David Granger, *John Dewey, Robert Pirsig, and the Art of Living: Revisioning Aesthetic Education* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 218.
25. Louise Rosenblatt, *Making Meaning with Texts: Selected Essays* (Portsmouth, N.H.: Heinemann, 2005).
26. Stanley Cavell, *The Senses of Walden* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 34.
27. Stanley Cavell, *The Claim of Reason: Wittgenstein, Skepticism, Morality, and Tragedy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), 125.