An interview with Stanley Cavell about his early book *The Senses of Walden*. First of all the interview clarifies some parts of that book and explains how it was written, then Cavell describes his relation with the figures of Thoreau and Emerson, his peculiar approach in reading the works of other authors, and tells something about his way of writing philosophy.

Keywords: *Walden*, H. D. Thoreau, R. W. Emerson

Premessa

L’intervista che segue fa perno su un breve libro di Stanley Cavell, una delle sue prime pubblicazioni, *The Senses of Walden*. Dunque il discorso è centrato su *Walden*, sul suo autore Thoreau, e su cosa Cavell intenda per lettura di un’opera. Ma a partire da questi temi immediatamente riconoscibili in *The Senses of Walden*, il campo dell’intervista si allarga fino a toccare le radici della cultura statunitense, la figura di Emerson e argomenti come l’influenza di un testo su di un altro, la scrittura, la lettura, il linguaggio e la filosofia stessa.

Stanley Cavell è autore di opere che affrontano gli argomenti più disparati e che cambiano frequentemente oggetto e punto di osservazione. Una possibilità, nell’avvicinarsi all’esplorazione di questo oceano, è quella...
di seguire alcune delle rotte suggerite da Cavell stesso: quella segnata dalla tematica dello scetticismo, quella del concetto di riconoscimento, quella che attraversa le opere di Shakespeare o il cinema, oppure ancora le varie vie di comunicazione con gli autori che più lo hanno influenzato: Wittgenstein, Emerson, Heidegger, Austin, Kant, Freud, i poeti romantici, Nietzsche, ecc. Le domande che ho posto a Cavell presuppongono un approccio differente: interrogare e leggere la sua filosofia a partire da una delle sue prime opere, una delle più unitarie, un testo che fin dalle prime pagine si interroga su cosa sia un ‘libro iniziale’ (cioè tale da stabilire una tradizione di pensiero) e come si debba leggerlo.

Anche se The Senses of Walden non è una delle principali opere di Cavell (come The Claim of Reason\(^2\) o In Quest of the Ordinary\(^3\)) né una delle più famose (come Pursuit of Happiness\(^4\) o Disowning Knowledge in Seven Plays of Shakespeare\(^5\)), vi appaiono molto chiaramente gli intenti principali che muovono gli altri suoi lavori (rintracciare una tradizione filosofica americana, scrivere di filosofia affrontando contemporaneamente la problematicità del fare filosofia, promuovere un nuovo scambio tra la tradizione filosofica tedesca e quella inglese), vi si possono individuare gran parte delle questioni principali esplorate nei suoi testi più importanti (scetticismo, riconoscimento, perfezionismo morale, criteri e condizioni di conoscenza), e rappresenta l’esempio più unitario e più esteso di lettura di un singolo testo tra le varie letture che Cavell ha proposto fino ad oggi.

L’attenzione di Cavell, quando è rivolta ad un’opera, sembra tesa a rintracciare qualcosa di sconosciuto proprio in ciò che ci appare più ovvio e trasparente, a scoprire, come Freud nel saggio Il perturbante, una zona in cui ciò che è familiare si identifica col suo contrario, in cui ‘heimlich’ si scopre sinonimo di ‘unheimlich’. I risultati più sorprendenti delle letture di Cavell si possono vedere nei suoi saggi dedicati alle tragedie di Shakespeare, un autore su cui è difficile pensare di poter dire qualcosa di originale e allo stesso tempo convincente.

Se le opere di Shakespeare appaiono familiari anche al di là dei confini della tradizione di lingua inglese, non si può dire lo stesso di Walden,

---


L’importanza del Walden di Thoreau

oggetto delle interpretazioni di The Senses of Walden, e del suo autore Thoreau. Walden, che prende il nome da un lago vicino a Concord nel Massachusetts, può essere visto come un simbolo delle radici più profonde e meno conosciute della cultura americana, l’allegoria di un’America sconosciuta anche a se stessa che necessita di una continua riscoperta.

Le riflessioni di Cavell a proposito di Walden si intrecciano spesso con le sue riflessioni a proposito del linguaggio. Non solo si può trovare nel libro di Thoreau molti passaggi a proposito della lettura e della scrittura, ma il protagonista di questo classico americano è il suo ‘scrittore’ ed ogni sua azione è, secondo Cavell, un’allegoria dello scrivere. E si potrebbe affermare che Cavell si identifica in parte in Thoreau in quanto scrittore, in quanto scrittore estremamente differente da lui, ma alle prese, come lui, con parole che si possono scegliere, ma di cui non si può scegliere il significato, con un linguaggio che lo precede e che vivrà dopo di lui, che dunque deve essere ereditato e lasciato in eredità.

Se gli scritti di Cavell sono spesso densissimi di temi e di prospettive, questa intervista può avere una funzione chiarificatrice. Dalle parole di Cavell emerge sia come egli sceglia gli argomenti da affrontare, sia quali siano le motivazioni del suo peculiare stile di scrittura e di argomentazione. Cavell riconosce esplicitamente il proprio tentativo di creare un testo leggibile a più livelli ed allo stesso tempo rigoroso, e vede queste caratteristiche anche nelle varie opere che lui stesso interpreta. Sia Walden che The Senses of Walden sono scritti con l’intento di avere più sensi differenti contemporaneamente.

Tra gli autori che Cavell cita più spesso, tra tutte le voci con cui mantiene un dialogo continuo, quella di Thoreau e quella di Emerson sono particolarmente importanti da cogliere se si vuole comprendere a fondo il suo pensiero. Cavell considera queste due figure come i fondatori della cultura americana, ma allo stesso tempo vede nella loro incerta fortuna il sintomo di una peculiare difficoltà di ascolto che sfocia in una sorta di repressione del loro pensiero. Emerson e Thoreau restano comunque un punto di riferimento costante per Cavell e non c’è quasi nessuna sua opera in cui essi non siano presenti. Ed oltre a confrontarsi in prima persona con questi due autori egli spesso accosta i loro testi a quelli di altri pensatori: in questa ‘intervista’ troviamo Emerson confrontato con Wittgenstein e Thoreau confrontato con Heidegger.

Il tema stesso dell’influenza che un autore può avere su di un altro è sviluppato in modo utile e fecondo in vari passaggi disseminati in tutta l’opera di Cavell. Vi è un continuo scoprire somiglianze e differenze, scoprire idee comuni sotto espressioni differenti, esplorare a fondo quali possano essere le ragioni della convergenza degli interessi di due autori, o come due autori diversi possano essere giunti a venire in contatto con idee simili.
Ma oltre ad essere un esempio di come riuscire a cogliere la voce degli autori che leggiamo, l’opera di Cavell è permeata da uno sforzo continuo per trovare la propria, da una serrata riflessione sul proprio stesso modo di scrivere.

È questo in fondo il tema del colloquio, avvenuto nel settembre 2005, a Boston. Desidero ringraziare molto Stanley Cavell per il tempo che mi ha dedicato, per aver rivisto il testo e per avermi autorizzato a pubblicarlo. Colgo l’occasione per ringraziare il prof. Luciano Handjaras, che come relatore della mia tesi di laurea, mi ha introdotto al pensiero di Cavell.

Dario Honnorat

An interview with Stanley Cavell

1. The title The Senses of Walden

Dario Honnorat: The title, The Senses of Walden, could mean ‘the interpretations of Walden’. However, in the book there is also a long reflection about senses and sensible knowledge in which you see Walden as a response to skepticism. Did you wish to suggest this double interpretation of the word ‘senses’ in the title? And are there other possible interpretations, or other reasons for the choice of this title?

Stanley Cavell: Certainly I wanted both and maybe even more than both. Thoreau makes a remark about senses in Asian literature, about the verses of Kabir that are said to have four different senses and I thought therefore about Western biblical interpretation (not doubting that Thoreau was alluding to this) in which there is familiarly said to be four levels of interpretation. (I seem to recall that Dante somewhere invokes this tradition.) So, because I’m calling Walden a kind of Scripture, I want to enforce, or extend, or emphasize this biblical connection, to treat the text in this way, and I think – I hope – that I give enough indications about how this happens in the text of Walden.

D.H.: So there are also more senses of the book’s title. I thought that senses could mean sensible knowledge, because there is a chapter in Walden called «Sounds».

Cavell: Yes, and also for example there is a moment, a wonderful moment, in which he calls Walden «earth’s eye», so that the lake itself is allowed to see, and the first thing it sees is you, and in the end he pictures himself looking into Walden seeing himself, that is, seeing that the lake is him.
2. The continuous relation between Cavell and Thoreau

D.H.: In your last book, *Philosophy the Day After Tomorrow*, you develop a confrontation between Thoreau and Heidegger that commenced in *The Senses of Walden*. Thoreau has been present and named in almost all of your books, but there have been moments in which you have put him in the foreground and moments in which he was present only marginally. What continually maintained your interest in this author, what are the reasons of your sometimes central focus on him and other times more marginal, and why were you interested in him throughout your career?

Cavell: That there is foreground and background is very usual, I think, with me, in the case of any writer that I care greatly about. When a piece of writing occupies the foreground I feel that that is almost an accident, a surprise, I mean it feels to me that it needs accounting for: «Why should this be occupying all of my attention?» But what doesn’t surprise me is that I still love everything that I ever loved. So if sometimes I just mention Thoreau very far in the background, I want the reader to sense that I could stop there and spend all the rest of the time just talking about the implied connection at that point, that I am in effect tearing myself away from this attachment. What is important is just the hint in bringing the voice in. I suppose I bring in my various voices so often because I have felt estranged so often in my formal education. I felt the need of my own set of colors, my own set of names, and a circle of figures to stand in, to feel in some way at home there, known there. Thoreau has for quite a long time been one of these figures. Even when he is invisible for hundreds of pages, it needs just a moment, a hint, and he is back.

But your question is why, why he is so important to me, and it is almost like asking why is America important to me, sometimes in the background, sometimes pressing forward. It’s true that I sometimes think of America as an orphan, as an abandoned child, sometimes as a misbehaving child, a ‘mechant’, always feeling itself completely powerless and completely powerful, while completely unknown, although even more unknown to itself. I claim Thoreau as one of the great philosophical writers of the nineteenth century. Sometimes I do not really care whether anybody else knows this or agrees with it. But often, maybe increasingly, it hurts me that America doesn’t know who he is. It knows him of course, in the sense that every American student is assigned some Thoreau, some Emerson – I realize that I don’t know this, maybe it is no longer true – in high school or in the first year of college, which is when I first read *Walden*. At that moment it meant almost nothing to me. I thought
what everybody thinks: that it is a book about nature, that there are good
descriptions in it, and some clever but rather old-fashioned aphorisms.
There is no news in this.

Maybe I should take the time to tell you how its power dawned on
me, about twenty years later, just after I had returned to Harvard per-
manently to teach philosophy. It was at the height of the Vietnam war,
and like so many other Americans I was sick about this war, for all the
reasons everyone now knows how to be sick about this war, because it
accomplished nothing but destruction, of others and of ourselves. In this
moment, in the summer of 1968, just at the same time of a great student
movement in Europe, I was asked to participate in the so-called Harvard
International Seminar, an annual event for visiting foreign intellectuals
and artists, not alone from Europe but also from the Near East and from
Asia and from Latin America, to come to Harvard for six or seven weeks
and live as a group and study topics of American culture. The seminar
met in two sections: the politicians, the economists, and the legal theorists
had one group, the larger group, about twenty-five people, and then I led
a somewhat smaller group of artists and philosophers, for whom I could
choose anything I wanted to talk about. I knew that I wanted them to
read the American works I love most and that expressed the America I
loved. Along with a few obvious classics (Whitman, Dickinson, Melville,
Twain) and some stories of Hemingway and of Faulkner, I assigned a
few Emerson Essays and the opening chapters of *Walden*. I hadn’t yet
or recently read much of Emerson and it still held little interest for me.
But as soon as I started to read *Walden* I was completely overcome by
it, I thought that every sentence spoke to me, every word.

Sometimes, at the best times, reading becomes an ecstasy, sometimes
in response to writing that we are just discovering, sometimes in the
presence of an old book we thought we knew. After reading *Walden’s*
opening chapters I went to friends and in my over-excitement asked,
«Listen. Have you read *Walden*? I mean, I know you have read it, but
have you *read* it? Do you actually know what this is? It is an explosion!
It is an ocean! It is an amazing thing!» And they all said «Yes, yes, we
know, a very good book, admirable book». And I said «No, no, not just
a good book, something far beyond that…» and nobody seemed to really
understand, so I felt that I couldn’t leave it alone until I had written my
little book about *Walden*.

About the connection with Heidegger. I had only begun reading
Heidegger when I wrote my Thoreau book, and had read only *Being and
Time*. When much later I read Heidegger’s interpretation of Hölderlin’s
*Der Ister* poem, I asked myself how it could be denied that there is an
intimacy between what Heidegger is saying in his Hölderlin interpretation
L’importanza del Walden di Thoreau

and what Thoreau is writing. It is easy to speak about influence, but when you find an intimacy that is so profound and so obvious, you are beyond conventional ideas of influence, something more fundamental is flowing in, something like a shared past. Thoreau is rediscovering what Hölderlin discovered in Germany in the generation after Kant’s revolution in Western philosophy. I gather there is little possibility that Thoreau read Hölderlin, but of course he wouldn’t have had to. He certainly read, as Emerson did, some of the German Romantics, for example Friedrich Schlegel, and if you are Thoreau (or read as so many good writers read), it needn’t take you long to know what a writer is doing, you don’t need to study it in college or to get a Ph.D. in the subject. What you need is a use for it. In my case I felt a blind good fortune in finding in Walden an opening from where I was to where I wanted to be, to what I wanted philosophy to be. I recognize that my book on Thoreau is not often regarded as professional philosophy, yet I persist in feeling that if one asks sympathetically, «Why isn’t it?», one may be moved to see something not obvious within today’s institutions concerning what philosophy can be. Of course some of my colleagues also do not consider Heidegger to be a significant or useful philosopher. I am not going to argue about that.

3. Does The Senses of Walden speak about how Cavell writes?

D.H.: Some words that appear more often in The Senses of Walden are ‘writer’, ‘writing’, ‘word’, ‘sentence’, ‘portion’, ‘reading’, ‘book’, ‘Scripture’, ‘writing as such’, ‘text’, ‘audience’. In the preface you define Walden itself as «a book about a book, about its own writing and reading». Writing is a subject of great importance that is also emphasized in other of your works. In The Senses of Walden, questions are raised about Thoreau’s writing, as in what does it mean to write, what does it mean to be a writer, and which is the audience for which a writer writes. Therefore, is it right to see this book as an occasion of wondering about your own writing and work?

Cavell: Certainly it is and it is more so because it is so different from anything that I could imagine writing. I admire it in its difference from me but also in its inspiration and the challenge to find one’s own voice. If I ask myself what my style of writing is I have no answer to this. I write so that I like what I write, or what it likes, or I despair of making it better. But I can see something about Thoreau’s writing that inspires me, something precisely expressed in your noting these recurrent words in his work that immediately were congenial with me, that I wanted to accentuate, and indeed felt that he was constantly emphasizing. What I
came to see, or sense, is simply that every word Thoreau writes means something, places itself, as if each is stressed (I believe that is an ideal of prose articulated by Friedrich Schlegel). It is undoubted prose, but it is as dense as poetry, and I want to feel that about any writing that I really care about, as I learned to feel that about music. It doesn’t have to be obviously beautiful, it doesn’t have to have an obvious form, but it has to trust itself with this kind of intensity and that was a great encouragement to me, to feel the power of this prose at the length of a book.

4. *Thoreau as character and historical figure*

D.H.: You say that it is «true enough» that *Walden* is a book about Henry David Thoreau, but you also refer to him most of the time as «the writer of *Walden*», why? To remind us that «the main character of this book is a writer» or are you trying to put a little distance between the historical Thoreau and the main character of the book?

Cavell: All of that, all of that. I appreciate what you just said, and I guess there are several ways to answer. The repetition of «The writer of *Walden*», as you suggest, is to emphasize the fact of a writer who is to be defined or identified no way other than by the totality of the writing before you. This writer is immortal, anyway is alive as long as *Walden* lives; Henry David Thoreau is mortal, you can visit his grave. I did not try in any summary way to differentiate or to relate this writer from Thoreau, partly as a way to emphasize that the only way to know who or what the writer is is to read *Walden*. Read it not for information, so to speak, but to learn who it is who could say and mean these words. He insists on this from the first page of book, which talks about the ‘I’ that will be revealed in it.

He says «in other books the ‘I’ is left out, but in this book it is going to be emphasized». Well, it is not always true that in other books the ‘I’ is always left out, people use the word ‘I’, so Thoreau is saying something very particular about the way he is going to use ‘I’, and what is immediately particular about this is that he does not know who this ‘I’ is. He is telling you that this something to be discovered, it is to be discovered what *Walden* is, or what writing *Walden* is, which is what creates this ‘I’. Sometimes the ‘I’ gets identified in a simple way. ‘I’ is identified, obviously, or associated with various birds. He is kind of rooster: «I would crow as loud as the rooster in the morning if only to wake my neighbors up», so to know him is to know exactly how he crows, and which means not ‘only’ to awaken, but, we will learn, to boast, so we have to know what he thinks he has to boast about. He also exchanges his identity
with a loon when it comes to bathe in Walden pond: ‘Loon’ is a kind of
lunatic, not etymologically no doubt, but to say of somebody that they
are a loon means there is something odd, something crazy about them,
so he saying that there is something crazy about himself. To exchange
identities with a bird is crazy. And he identifies with the lake. He once
identifies Walden pond as «earth’s eye», and surely this is to be heard
also as «earth’s I». That is why I claim the writer as the creator and the
creation of his discovery of the earth. Is he serious? But to be witness to
such discoveries has been in its way as exhilarating as it obviously is to
the writer. I thought that is also something that I want to know about
writing, to discover with this intensity and freedom why you write, and
who you write for, and who are you that you are writing for these peo-
ple in this way. That is why I say that this is a fundamental topic of the
book Who does he writes for? If I answer that he writes for America,
then the question becomes what America is, who Americans are. Is it for
these Americans, those he depicts? But he keeps denying those he meets
or refers to, those, for example, with «a maggot of patriotism in their
heads». And he names very few. There is an Indian, and there is an Irish
family that he says impatient things about, even mean things. He refers
to Emerson as «one other person» he talked with. His refraining from
naming Emerson is perhaps a gesture implying the question: «How can
I name anybody when I don’t even know who I am?»

D.H.: Maybe also because, as he wrote, he was in his molting season,
like the bird that goes to Walden to change its feathers.

Cavell: Good. Molting season. So the ‘I’ is going to go through even
this change, where all its identities themselves change. The ‘I’ is going to
be constantly discovered. «I spent my days there». Every year he is there
he will molt, lose his feathers, and cloak himself again.

D.H.: And to be reborn, maybe…

Cavell: Yes, and you don’t awaken once, you awaken endlessly. Tho-
reau jokes about people who boast about being reborn, he says «I meet
people who say that they have been born twice – and think that twice is
enough». There is a sort of continuous self-discovering and self-inven-
tion, but he set a place where discovery and invention are intertwined.
In fact I have a private view about the ‘I’, namely that he is also making
a philosophical, even metaphysical, claim about it. I actually don’t know
whether Thoreau had read Fichte, and I don’t know who knows, but it
seems to me that is clear in him that the universe has to be derived from
the ‘I’ as it is in Fichte, and that that is what is going on, again, on the first page. How could I prove this?

D.H.: It seems to be an interesting idea. The first thing that struck me in Walden just on the literary level, was the position of the ‘I’. The book can seem to be a diary, because it spoke about facts that happened to him; but there is also a great consciousness of the fact that the first person is a writer and a living person. One of the most common and most shared critical theories about Dante’s Divina Commedia is that there is the Dante author of the poem and the Dante inside the story who is just a character; that is a very popular distinction. But in the Divina Commedia the character Dante doesn’t at all do things that a man can do, he goes through Hell, Purgatory and Paradise. So also on the literary level I haven’t really found anything to compare to Walden regarding this position of the ‘I’, and I felt that this was very shortly summarized in how you use the expression «the writer of Walden». Calling him «the writer of Walden» seems to express a certain consciousness of all these literary facts.

Cavell: That is exactly what it is meant to do. We have also to keep in mind in some ways how early Walden is in American literature. It is still before the Civil War, so it is not part of the Civil War literature of America, yet I think of Walden also in an important sense as a part of the Civil War literature. I will explain how. It was published in 1854, a very few years before the Civil War, when many people thought that there was going to be a civil war over the question of slavery. I say that Thoreau predicted, or specifically prepared for, justified, the Civil War. In The Senses of Walden I cite the Bhagavad Gita which, like Walden, is divided into eighteen sections. Can I prove that that is why Walden has 18 sections? I say that Walden is an epic, but most epics have 12 books or 24 books. The Bhagavad Gita is an epic and is an epic about a civil war and indeed about two brothers, and the civil war in the States has always been called «the war between brothers». This could be a title of Bhagavad Gita «A war between brothers»; it opens with the question of the right to go to war against a brother. Walden and the Bhagavad Gita also have something in common in their doctrines. «Unattachment» in the Bhagavad Gita remarkably resembles, if I understand, what Thoreau means by the word «interested», which means to come between something and to have some distance – the gesture that Thoreau calls interested is not to go forward into the thing but to hold back and perpetually relate yourself to the thing, to tie your faith with it, making it a sacred place.
If *Walden*, or indeed Walden, is America, this is because it constantly needs discovery. I say over and over about Emerson that he insists America has not been discovered. It is a question whether it will be discovered as a place to live differently from the ancient injustices of Europe. One does not ask whether one can live in Italy, or France, or England. Can one live in France? Can one live in England? But people have lived in such places since the beginning of inherited history, with nameable ancestors of those in the present. But not here in America. Here you had to kill the people that lived here as part of settling in, and it is always a question whether the settlement is going to survive. Thoreau talks, everyone who is interested in the Mayflower settlers talks, about their first terribly difficult winter and how many were not able to survive it.

5. **Criteria of coherence of a text in Thoreau and Cavell**

D.H.: In *The Senses of Walden* you say that Thoreau suggests how *Walden* itself must be read by describing how he reads and what it means to read ‘in a high sense’. Therefore, one can assume a text must be able to support its own way of reading as a criterion of coherence of writing. I feel your works support your own way of reading if they are interpreted in a way similar to the way you use to interpret other works. Do you recognize in your work the struggle to be correctly self-commented, and the ability to withstand your own way to read?

Cavell: That is a very generous question to me, it takes my writing seriously in the way I hope can be taken, in the way I hope it deserves to be taken. I have to acknowledge that I put as much pressure as I can on my writing, wishing to take it so far as I can to the limit of what I think is intelligible. I constantly have to restrain myself from the impulse to explain too many things, why I use one word rather than another, why I allude to one author rather than another, and so on. This would soon produce an unreadable text. The first thing I say to myself is «I am not a poet». If I am not a poet I can bring in any poetic device I want, I feel free in prose to be stylistically inconsistent. But I repeatedly find that I want the intensity of poetry. I trust my way of reading and I want to be worthy of that way of reading. Many of the writers that I care about write in some variation of this way (Thoreau and Emerson for example), and I’m sure a reason that I try to produce what I call readings of various things – poetry, plays, Shakespeare, films, Emerson, Wittgenstein – is to show as thoroughly and as specifically as I can how I read, what I want reading to be.

When I started to write about films nobody that I knew of wrote at length about a Hollywood film, undertook to treat a film as if it displayed
something like the same weight of intention that we expect of a work of art. There seemed nothing at that level to say about such films. It was a field in which I felt the pleasure of demonstrating reading where there seemed almost nothing, as it were no depth, to be read. That we pass through the world without knowing our experience, above all our experience of others, is a great topic of Hollywood films as I understand them, perhaps of film more generally. It is perhaps the thought more than any other that has perpetuated my interest in the so-called ordinary language philosophy of Wittgenstein and of my teacher J. L. Austin.

6. Thinking of The Senses of Walden

D.H.: In 1980, eight years after writing The Senses of Walden, you felt the necessity to add the essays Thinking of Emerson and An Emerson Mood. In Thinking of Emerson you expressed your feelings or opinions about The Senses of Walden as embarrassment and encouragement. Now, thinking of The Senses of Walden, what are your feelings and opinions? How have they changed in 25 years?

Cavell: The fact is that I still do not know why Emerson suddenly became available to me, it was almost ten years after The Senses of Walden was published that I finally understood how to get into Emerson. One of the reasons it took so long is that Emerson and Thoreau had known each other so thoroughly and had so many preoccupations in common that you can feel at a loss to tell their thoughts apart. You don’t know where to begin, or rather, you don’t know which of them has begun and which becomes the echo. When I had Thoreau so much in my mind, preparing to write my little book about Walden, I felt that I had memorized Thoreau’s book, in the sense that if you woke me up in the middle of the night and you read me a sentence from it and asked me «What’s the next sentence?» I would be able to tell you. But his being so much a part of me had the effect of making Emerson’s writing seem wrong, it seemed too flowery, too obviously poetic for really strong prose. Emerson seemed abstract where Thoreau was concretely talking about this bird on this twig in this tree in this light in this month in this weather.

D.H.: …about the bottom of this lake...

Cavell: The bottom of this lake, exactly. And Emerson just seemed floating in the sky. I didn’t believe him. But one day it came crashing down upon me in its difference, and when I heard this I couldn’t get out of it and I was ready again to listen and I had my Emerson mania. I think
that is an honest answer about why I couldn’t hear them together. In fact they had something like this problem with each other. Their minds were so attuned, so intimately responsive, they knew everything about one another, that they had difficulty being in the same room together, as if embarrassed to be courteous or conventional with one another. But when Emerson went on a long tour of Europe, Thoreau, at Emerson’s request, moved into Emerson’s house, he amused the children, he helped Emerson’s wife doing the cooking and the cleaning, whatever the house needed he did it. Yet Emerson will say eventually that Thoreau’s writings made him «wretched and nervous», citing Thoreau’s habit of using words in unnatural places, as if his constantly finding fault with the world included finding fault with language. But here again, Emerson also explicitly says that «every word they say [meaning those with whom he converses every day] chagrins me». How is this different from everyone’s language making him «wretched and nervous», beginning with his own?

7. Emerson and Thoreau

D.H.: In many of your works appear the names of Thoreau and Emerson. Specifically in The Senses of Walden and in Thinking of Emerson, you said «Emerson and Thoreau deaden one another’s words» and «understanding Thoreau was bound to leave Emerson out». After the The Senses of Walden you dedicated many writings to Emerson. Did your understanding of Thoreau and the understanding of Emerson reconcile in the end, or did you feel when you were writing about Emerson that you were leaving Thoreau out?

Cavell: By the time I felt able to write about Emerson I did not, I think, feel that I was leaving Thoreau out. When I attained some confidence in my grasp of Emerson, Thoreau remained lucid for me, even when I was not particularly interested in going back to read him. I could mention places where I knew Thoreau was paraphrasing or alluding to Emerson and that came to seem understandable, or anyway familiar to me. When Thoreau speaks about «quiet desperation» I immediately recall that Emerson had talked about «silent melancholy». It is virtually a paraphrase, but there is a difference between ‘desperation’ and ‘melancholy’ and now I can be interested in this difference. Before, when I could not see, or not bear, the difference I just thought that they were trying to say exactly the same things, and they interfered with each other. But after Thoreau became a constant companion for me, it was a source of inspiration for me in my thinking about Emerson.
But another feature of my relation to Emerson is that I often read him in comparison with other writers, whereas with Thoreau I have only rarely thought particularly to compare his with other writings (my essay on Thoreau and Heidegger is exceptional for me), except for Scriptures. I believe this is significant in thinking who they are, and their differences. It is my impression that neither Emerson nor Thoreau (with a few splendid exceptions) is very well known in Europe at the moment. This hurts me, and I am glad to remember that a remarkable number of remarkable European intellectuals in the nineteenth and the early twentieth centuries refer to Emerson with admiration. I have in mind not alone the well-known instances of Carlyle in England and Nietzsche in Germany (though the pervasive importance of Emerson to Nietzsche, while often forgotten, seems currently to be of increasing interest). I think also of Maeterlinck, who is quite unfashionable now although he won the Nobel prize for literature, but the text of whose play *Pelléas and Mélisande* Debussy used almost intact for his great opera. Maeterlinck refers to Emerson as one of his three masters. You may not know that Emerson occurs (or rather is mentioned) in Proust’s *À la recherche du temps perdu* and that Proust, when early in his writing life he was translating Ruskin into French, expresses indebtedness to Emerson a number of times in the notes to his translation. (I am planning to write something about these occurrences in Proust.) And you can find other instances. The literary historian and critic Ernst Robert Curtius devotes a chapter to Emerson in a book of his essays. The chapter does not break new ground as I recall it, but it shows respect and a sense of the work’s important.

Only comparatively recently, about fifteen years ago, did I learn that Wittgenstein read Emerson and liked what he read. The question was prompted at a small conference in Norway where ten or twelve of us devoted to Wittgenstein’s work met above the arctic circle near where Wittgenstein had lived alone. I was at that period just discovering Emerson as a philosopher and I could not get him out of my mind. A number of times when someone asked me about my reading of a passage in the *Investigations*, I quoted Emerson as an interpretation of Wittgenstein’s text. For example, I remember being asked why Wittgenstein attaches importance to the idea that, as he says, «Explanations come to an end somewhere», whereupon I replied, «Emerson says we cannot spend the day in explanation». Soon this became a kind of joke: «You ask Stanley a question about Wittgenstein and he is going to cite Emerson for you». I finally said during one of the last days: «Well I am not out of my mind. Does anyone know whether Wittgenstein had actually read Emerson?» One of Wittgenstein’s editors, Georg von Wright, was present and he did not know the answer, but three weeks later he kindly wrote me a letter
saying that although he still did not know the answer directly, he did know that Wittgenstein read Musil and that Musil quotes Emerson a number of times in his Journal. That went some way toward satisfying me. Then later, in Ray Monk’s splendid biography of Wittgenstein, Wittgenstein’s knowledge of Emerson is confirmed.

I would like to add that you would not expect that any of the European figures I just listed as readers of Emerson would also have read *Walden*. Thoreau evidently does not exist in some comparable way as an independent writer in Europe, as far as I can tell, even though I know that there are some young people there who care about him. The analogous condition in the United States is that there is something happening here, in a small way, that is called an Emerson revival, but nothing to be called a Thoreau revival. (There is perhaps something to be called a Thoreau cult, but that seems always to have been the case. He is never forgotten in private.) This affects, in some way I do not understand, how I write about each of them. I said just now that I am not moved beyond a very narrow circle of reference, to compare Thoreau with other writers. But in the present context I am moved to put Thoreau in the same sentence with Dante. *Walden* invokes the universe, if in a miniature scale— it has for example a progress and a path in which directions are lost and found and regions where he encounters Hell and others where he is invoking Heaven. I do not wish to crush a marvelous writer by foolishly comparing him with a world-historical figure of infinite influence. But it is a moment from which to say that Thoreau fits here in a way Emerson does not. Thoreau is not an intellectual the way Emerson (or Dante) is, he does not keep up with what is being said and done and forgotten and remembered.

8. Ways of writing philosophy: Heidegger, Carnap and Cavell

D.H.: If we consider two conceptions of language, ways, or styles of writing philosophy, such as the one of Carnap in *The Overcoming of Metaphysics Through the Logical Analysis of Language* and the one of the portion of Heidegger’s *What Is Metaphysics?* that Carnap quoted and analyzed in that essay, your conception of language seems to try to reunite the efforts of both. Is it also possible to say that you find something repulsive about both these ways of creating sentences, even if they are sources of inspiration for your work?

Cavell: Again, I am going to say, attraction to and repulsion from both. One way to answer this question is to move again from writing to reading. But even before I do this, I note that the most obvious feature
in common between Carnap and Heidegger is a systematic distrust of philosophy, in each of their distinctive ways. It is why they both must or should come up in thinking about Wittgenstein. One might say that Carnap wants to write in such a way that philosophy cannot start and that Heidegger wants to write in such a way that philosophy cannot stop. This takes me to what I mean by reading. Maybe you have come across my speaking of two myths of reading in preparation for writing philosophy. In one myth the philosopher has to read everything before he or she writes and in the other myth to read nothing. Wittgenstein’s *Investigations* refers to six or seven writers, with one or two sentences, never systematically, as if they are there just because he happens to think of these sentences, whereas Heidegger always cites the complete editions of everybody he refers to and he pretends to have read every serious work of philosophy, and on the contrary Carnap suggests that he is obliged to refer to nobody, except as a scientist or logician refers to a predecessor or else to deny or ridicule what another has hopelessly tried to say. I am attracted to both myths. I know I satisfy neither; it is not the case either that I have read everything or that I have read nothing. For philosophy this sense of existing between totality and emptiness (Hegel has his version of this, so has Wittgenstein) is chronic. I was trained more by philosophers who had read Carnap or studied or argued with Carnap, than by those who studied or read Heidegger, but Heidegger you can, or many can, read by themselves, given his persistent effort to place himself in relation to the history of philosophy and his playing with language, at which no one need feel that there is an expertise which settles his claims.

9. Cavell’s approach to the work of other authors

D.H.: You wrote about and interpreted many types of works: movies, plays, poetry, philosophical texts, short stories, etc. Every time you discovered or recovered something unexpected. Can you say something about how you usually approach a work and how you go deeper, how you find your path in someone else’s work?

Cavell: I tried to say something earlier about my insistence on reading various kinds of works. It is as though I have the sense that the universe is made up of nests and chains of signs that most of us, most of the time, leave unread. But your question now is how I approach a work. How does one even get to the place where you have to approach a work, that is, how does a work come to be in your life at all, in the same room with you, and, more importantly, why do you return to it? With me this often seems to be an accident. Perhaps this sense results from my having come
to philosophy, and indeed to something of a literary education, rather late. Not just because I did not have a very satisfactory education in my early years, but also because so much of my time through college was spent playing and writing music, which is irreplacably important for me, but was also in obvious ways intellectually isolating.

When I first read Austin I thought it was very good, but nothing much happened with it; I read it before I started my Ph.D. dissertation but he hardly figured in what I was planning to write. Then when he came to Harvard as Visiting Professor for a semester, I attended his opening seminar on the subject of what he entitles *Excuses*, and I left again in one of my ecstasies. The material was not new to me, but all at once philosophy seemed to me to reach into every gesture of human existence, and I had to know how this had happened. And again, when I first read Wittgenstein I thought it was a sort of unsystematic pragmatism and in fact that is still, I believe, how many philosophers understand it.

I might say that approaching a text for me is not a matter of what the concept of approaching suggests, something like getting closer and closer to it. The question for me is how you find yourself within a text, and it remains a question for me as long as I am interested in the text. Whether I am in a text or I am not in a text is the question for me, and the answer depends upon whether I feel I know how to let it teach me, take me farther than I sense myself to be. I do not know what causes the initial sympathy, the opening bond with the text. It can be the most obvious or trivial matter, like wondering why the opening word of the first major speech in Shakespeare’s *The Winter’s Tale* is “Nine” (just to ask the question produced the answer that it refers to the Queen’s pregnancy, and this served to open the play for me), or why the principal couple in Frank Capra’s film *It Happened One Night* is photographed walking together away from us down an empty road saying almost nothing to each other (in that context it signals that kind of isolation from the world, for example from viewers like us, that is produced by their recognition of their finding themselves in love). When after writing about Shakespearian tragedy I found I wanted to study film comedy, the first group of films I ordered for a course I was planning (chosen by my memory of those films that had made a lasting impression upon me) I noticed that several of them shared the feature of what I came to call remarriage, and very soon this single feature – one in which not a young couple find each other but a slightly older couple rekindle each other – began producing a set of conditions in the various films that I could scarcely keep up with. I could not put aside the wish to understand what was causing this. Things can happen quite differently. Soon after my initial excitement over the beauty and depth and precision of Thoreau’s *Walden* I recognized that his idea
of ‘morning’ meant both dawning, the beginning of daylight and also, spelled ‘mourning’, meant grieving. It was clear that this was a pun and that Thoreau attached deep significance to it, but I could find nothing to say about this that satisfied this sense of depth. I had to become an expert in learning to wait for ideas to come to me in useful forms. Sometimes a book has come easily to me, sometimes not. *The Claim of Reason* took sixteen years to complete; *The Senses of Walden*, after a year of preparation and a time of freedom from teaching, was written in about seven weeks. *Pursuits of Happiness*, the book on Hollywood comedy, after an initial experiment in reading through one of the films, was completed during one sabbatical year. Teaching has been enormously time-consuming for me, but also inspiring, even necessary for me. I became quite good at preparing notes and sketches during the academic year and then, when the summer vacation came, writing very fast. That eventually worked well enough, though I wish I had written more…

D.H.: I think it worked because, for example, after I read your book about Hollywood films of remarriage, even now after three years since reading it, if I see a film, even a bad film, in which there is remarriage or some of the features that you underline in that book, I keep finding continuous confirmations of those ideas. And this is maybe another criterion of the success of your interpretation: people that read it find themselves in it.

Cavell: I am very glad to hear that. I feel quite lucky at the way my writing life has developed. I have said more than once that I have had a pampered academic life, been treated very gently. I have taught only at the places that I loved most, at Berkeley and at Harvard, and mostly I have not had to teach anything that I did not have an active interest in, so that teaching was always in part a matter of finding ways to experiment with writing, and the other way around as well. In huge universities like Berkeley and Harvard you can be afforded considerable freedom as a teacher. Of course I made compromises with some particular texts that had to be included in order to construct a course that was coherent and that made a reasonable contribution to a department’s philosophical curriculum, but the courses were almost always, even from the beginning, ones that I was devoted to, and that has been a great blessing.