CROSSING BORDERS WITHIN: STANLEY CAVELL AND THE POLITICS OF INTERPRETATION

Naoko Saito
Graduate School of Education
Kyoto University

Paul Standish
Institute of Education
University of London

Abstract. The matter of crossing borders in the creation of democratic communities arises in ways that are pressing, both within the nation-state and on a global scale. Tensions between tendencies toward nationalism and the cosmopolitan call for global understanding touch the heart of ideas of democracy as beginning at home — at political, psychological, and existential levels. Yet in both orientations there is a certain consolidation of what John Dewey called the “we.” In this essay Naoko Saito and Paul Standish address questions concerning the “I’s” relation to the “we.” It is through an exploration of the apparently apolitical approach of Stanley Cavell, through what he calls the “politics of interpretation,” that Saito and Standish try to give substance to the critical destabilization of these terms and tensions that they believe to be necessary. Cavell’s Wittgensteinian approach to skepticism and his account of the Emersonian sense of the tragic help to demonstrate the need to meet the political crisis of democracy with language of a more subtly critical kind. The antifoundationalism Cavell derives from these sources, with its concomitant notion of philosophy as translation, provides us with a language that answers to the problems of the “we.” This is, the authors conclude, a better formulation of, and a more hopeful response to, the challenge of crossing borders within. It touches despair but realizes within it the prophetic power of language. And it shows the political crisis in which democracy finds itself to be something that is not peculiar to our times but internal to the very nature of our (political) lives.

It is easy in the world to live after the world’s opinion; it is easy in solitude to live after our own; but the great man is he who in the midst of the crowd keeps with perfect sweetness the independence of solitude.1

Till the Great Society is converted into a Great Community, the Public will remain in eclipse. Communication alone can create a great community. Our Babel is not one of tongues but of the signs and symbols without which shared experience is impossible.2

The Inevitability of “We” and “I”

In the early twentieth century, John Dewey asserted the need for a Great Community — for a democratic community, inclusive of difference and diversity, and yet sustaining the hope of unity:

No amount of aggregated collective action of itself constitutes a community. For beings who observe and think, and whose ideas are absorbed by impulses and become sentiments and interests, “we” is as inevitable as “I.” But “we” and “our” exist only when the consequences of combined action are perceived and become an object of desire and effort, just as “I” and “mine” appear on the scene only when a distinctive share in mutual action is consciously asserted.

Interactions, transactions, occur *de facto* and the results of interdependence follow. But participation in activities and sharing in results are additive concerns. They demand *communication* as a prerequisite. \[PIP, 330\]

The creation of democracy, Dewey claims, must begin at home and then expand outward \[PIP, 368\]. That such a community can be created in spite of “territorial states and political boundaries” is an article of his democratic faith \[PIP, 370\]. The cosmopolitan aspiration to cross boundaries is not merely a matter of politics: it requires ethical and educational endeavor, and even religious and aesthetic qualities of experience. Democracy in this sense is an unattainable ideal, something that can never be fully perfected; yet, at the same time, it is in the process of being attained, continually, in our daily experiences \[PIP, 328\].

Today the challenge of crossing borders and creating democratic communities remains, both within the nation-state and on a global scale, and it seems likely that the problems currently faced are more complex than those that confronted Dewey. In this context, however, calls for global understanding and for respect for the nation-state and native culture increasingly reinforce the sense of a division between the inside and the outside of a community. One possible way, it seems, of addressing the question of how to cross borders is to stabilize the cultural identity of the “we” but in such a way as to achieve a sensitization to differences. This is to expand the boundaries of our experience and understanding based upon the foundation of home. Yet foundationalist thinking of this kind can bring with it the risk of a closure of politics.

Education in Japan provides an interesting point of reference here to the extent that its call for cross-cultural communication and global understanding leads in reality to what amounts to a *monolingualism* of the “we” — a mentality that is in effect deaf to the unknown and to the incomprehensible other. The importance of this remark can be seen all the more clearly in light of the fact that Japanese educational policy and practice seem today to be divided between an orientation toward liberalism and internationalization, on the one hand, and a more reactionary turn toward traditionalism and nationalism, on the other. Japan is perhaps an extreme case in terms of its self-containment: with variation in culture very limited, and with its island status, not to mention the background of its period of closure to the outside world, from 1600 to 1868. Hence, its policy and practice would seem to bring questions of building walls and crossing borders into sharp relief. But the reality is that the liberals are neoliberals and the traditionalists are neoconservatives: both are products of globalization.

NAOKO SAITO is Associate Professor of Education at the Graduate School of Education, Kyoto University, Yoshida-Honmachi, Sakyo-ku, Kyoto-shi, Kyoto 606-8501, Japan; e-mail: <saitona@educ.kyoto-u.ac.jp>. Her primary areas of scholarship are philosophy of education and American philosophy.

PAUL STANDISH is Professor of Philosophy of Education at the Institute of Education, University of London, Philosophy Section, EFPS, Institute of Education, University of London, 20 Bedford Way, London, WC1H0AL, United Kingdom; e-mail: <p.standish@ioe.ac.uk>. His primary areas of scholarship include the relationship between Analytical and Continental philosophy and the productive tensions this produces.
The consequence is that, even in the case of the liberals, the relation to other cultures is understood in terms that presuppose the sameness of a globalized neoliberalism: this surreptitiously builds a barrier against any real engagement with the other.

This tension between the tendency toward nationalism and the cosmopolitan call for global understanding is a problem that is immanent to any conception of democracy as beginning at home, and this is true not only on a political level, but also in psychological and existential terms. In both cases there is a reliance on a certain consolidation of the “we,” which raises the following question: How can this consolidation, this inner psyche of the closure of politics, be interrupted? It is necessary somehow to destabilize this narrow sense of the “we,” but without giving up hope for unity. The “we,” the common, becomes a perfectionist term, a commonality always still to come, always still to be achieved. How then can “I” contribute to the creation of the Great Community, to a community that is global in aspiration, that is tolerant and hospitable to strangers, but that does not imagine that there can be any foundationalist solution? Our concern in this essay is to address these questions concerning the “I’s” relationship to the “we.” To do this we need more than the political language of patriotism and cosmopolitanism, and something other than the identity politics of multiculturalism — that is, we need something other than those ways of thinking that have been prominent in educational policy and practice, and in educational research. Through an exploration of the apparently apolitical approach of Stanley Cavell, through what he calls the “politics of interpretation,” we shall try to give substance to the critical destabilization that we believe to be necessary.

Cavell’s Wittgensteinian approach to skepticism and his account of the Emersonian sense of the tragic help to demonstrate the need to meet the political crisis of democracy with language of a more subtly critical kind. The antifoundationalism he derives from these sources, with its concomitant notion of philosophy as translation, can provide us with the vision of an alternative language that answers to the problems of the “we.” This will be, we shall conclude, a more hopeful response to the challenge of crossing borders within, touching despair but realizing within it the prophetic power of language. And it will show this “political crisis” to be not something peculiar to our times but internal to the very nature of our [political] lives.

In the following we shall first discuss some limits that can be found in political language in response to the problems of the “we.” These limits will include the language of social inclusion and the politics of recognition. Next, we will introduce Cavell’s politics of interpretation in light of his reading of ordinary language philosophy. We will conclude by suggesting a possible education of Emerson’s “great man” — that is, of the person who “in the midst of the crowd keeps with perfect sweetness the independence of solitude,” of the “I” who

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can contribute to the creation of the Great Community. Although some have perceived Cavell’s approach to be apolitical and merely linguistic, his philosophy points, we claim, to an alternative path for political education, where the investment in language that is education disrupts the monolingualism of the “we”: this is to criticize democracy from within, the very means of democracy’s recreation.

**Beyond the Limits of the Language of Politics**

In considering how to respond to these questions of crossing borders, these dilemmas of the “we,” our aim initially is to identify, in an unabashedly schematic way, three approaches that political philosophy has taken, which we shall name the “patriotic,” the “cosmopolitan,” and, from a slightly different angle, the “multiculturalist.” The sketches of these approaches we provide here are, for reasons of economy, to some extent caricatures, but they serve, we believe, to draw out latent aspects of those more sophisticated positions with which they are associated. Moreover, they highlight policy or philosophical articulations of practices in schools and the controversies that attend them — most obviously in the case of education for patriotism, but also with regard to tolerance and understanding, and the pervasive prevalence of the politics of recognition. While each approach addresses in its respective way the question of crossing borders, they all exhibit in some degree a tendency toward the closure of politics.

The patriotic approach can be illustrated by the above-mentioned case of Japanese education, with its two distinctive tendencies: on the one hand, and by no means as an exception to general trends in the world, its discourse is steeped in an economy of exchange conditioned by the global market, the aim of education in the name of globalization — the very nature of its discourse — being converted into the terms of accountability; on the other hand, there is again this supposed commitment to inclusion, but this time the direction is inward. “Love for Japan” is a phrase that has become critical in moral education and citizenship education. Love for people with whom one is intimate is the foundation, it is presumed, of love for those who are distant. And in this context the significance of the mother tongue is reemphasized. In his best-selling book *The Dignity of the Nation*, Masahiko Fujiwara argues that studying the Japanese language is the best way of cultivating “genuinely international people” and that “reading books in Japanese is more important than foreign languages.”  

In moral education, a supplement called *Kokoro-no-Noto* (Notebook of the Heart) encourages children to love their family (complete, of course, with father and mother); their local community; their beautiful country, Japan; and then, on the strength of this, the world as a whole.

In contrast there is the second, cosmopolitan approach to crossing borders. In the American context, Martha Nussbaum has reacted to appeals to the “emotion of

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national pride” and the “sense of shared national identity” that, she alleges, lie in Richard Rorty’s patriotism. To expand the circles of our life, and to raise awareness beyond its boundaries, Nussbaum proposes cosmopolitan education — education for “world citizenship, rather than democratic or national citizenship.” Echoing the Stoics, Nussbaum speaks of concentric circles — the world community beginning with the self, expanding to the immediate family, to the local community, to the country, and finally to the largest circle, “humanity as a whole.” Nussbaum’s cosmopolitan stance is universalist in the sense that she appeals to the “world community of justice and reason” and to “basic features of human personhood that obviously also transcend national boundaries.”

The third approach is represented by Charles Taylor’s multiculturalism, based upon what he calls the “politics of recognition.” Starting with the “dialogical character” of human life, Taylor first claims that “our understanding of the good things in life can be transformed by our enjoying them in common with people we love” \(PR, 32–33\). The “recognition” given by “significant others” is crucial in understanding and forming our identity \(PR, 36\). Applying this to the public sphere, Taylor goes on to suggest that “we all recognize the equal value of different cultures” \(PR, 64\). It is on the strength of this and through mutual recognition that we can produce “what Gadamer has called a ‘fusion of horizons’. “ Such a fusion “operates through our developing new vocabularies of comparison, by means of which we can articulate these contrasts” \(PR, 67\). Taylor suggests a vision of education for crossing borders that is based upon “a willingness to be open to comparative cultural study of the kind that must displace our horizons in the resulting fusions” \(PR, 73\). Taylor’s approach to conditions of multiculturalism is highly sophisticated and subtle, but in the end its dynamics confine it within what we will call here the political discourse of social inclusion.

While these three approaches differ in their views on how the crossing of borders might be addressed, they manifest some common pitfalls. First, they all show a tendency toward securing identity as the primary condition for crossing borders. In the patriotic approach, this is found in the native, the familiar culture and language; for the cosmopolitan, its basis is sought in the common principle of humanity; for the multiculturalist, a mutual recognition of the good that identifies each different culture must be the legitimating ground on which we stand. To this extent these positions each harbor a foundationalism, however much, in the cosmopolitan and multiculturalist cases at least, the metaphysical connotations of this may be eschewed. Second, their positions are each based upon contrasting the relation between the native (the close, the familiar) and the foreign (the distant, 

the strange). Even in the cosmopolitan approach, a contrast is made between the distant (foreign) and the close (the native). In the multiculturalist approach, this symmetry is indicated in its distinctive idea of “contrast.” Third, in each of these cases, though in different ways, there is a drive toward inclusion — whether this takes the form perhaps of a global accommodation in the cosmopolitan’s case, of harmony in the multiculturalist’s, or of solidarity in the patriot’s. Fourth, these positions incorporate different versions of familiar assumptions about the knowability or approachability of other cultures. In the patriot’s case, there is an underlying assumption that what is close and immediate is easier to access and, by implication, understand, and perhaps also that such proximity is more likely to provide a basis for sympathy. In the cosmopolitan’s, there is the expectation that we can exercise our reason in order to arrive at principles we can hold in common. Most typically, in the multiculturalist case, it is the “articulation” of identities and their “recognition” that, in spite of acknowledgment of the difficulty of understanding the “strange” and the “unfamiliar,” are most likely to enable us to understand other cultures (PR, 127).

To understand these positions in terms of their tendency toward foundationalism, whether manifest or latent, is to begin to see their inadequacy in response to the problems of the “we,” with its inclination toward consolidation. In spite of their commitment to “inclusion,” based on the principle of “equality,” is it not here that we see the kind of monolingualism we have mentioned — a mentality that suffers from various forms of deafness to the unknown and the incomprehensible, and that expects things to be reducible, at least in principle, to common terms? What is missing from, or at best muffled by, these three approaches is the tragic sense of what happens at home, within the home — in our relations to what is familiar and close, to what is allegedly native to us, and in what is apparently identifiable as a culture, our own culture. These positions have in common the fact that their political idiom lacks the sense of the rivenness of home, the rift within the “we.” Home cannot be [simply] a stable shelter, the foundation of morality. The sense of separation and disjunction, of being riven, is covered over by pieties of inclusive sympathy and recognition of difference, yet this sense is, we believe, crucial if the problem of crossing borders is to be addressed, as it were, from within.

In order to get into the deeper psyche of the “we,” a language more subtle than this political monolingualism is needed — a language that can reignite the embers of political passion out of the ashes of consolidated consciousness. We need an alternative antifoundationalist position in order more powerfully to resist this closure of politics and thereby to sustain the perfectionist hope of a unity beyond boundaries.

**Cavell’s Politics of Interpretation**

It is in light of this need for an alternative antifoundationalism that we turn to Cavell’s seemingly apolitical account of political participation. While his writings have sometimes been criticized for being overly concerned, even merely
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8. Stanley Cavell, *The Senses of Walden* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 53. This work will be cited as *SW* in the text for all subsequent references.


As a consequence of our necessary involvement with a community, the politics of interpretation is crucially related to the subject, to a “we.” As Cavell claims, “the philosophical appeal to what we say, and the search for our criteria on the basis of which we say what we say, are claims to community.” Ordinarily language philosophy’s characteristic mode of appeal takes the form, “When we say..., we mean....” This is an appeal to ordinary use not as some kind of empirical generalization about the behavior of a particular people; a survey of usage would be beside the point. Two things should be noted especially. That the appeal uses the first person shows the significance of voice: the authentication of the statement has to do with the speaker’s sincere assent, with how things seem to her, and with her desire or responsibility to express this. That it is plural testifies to the person’s desire or responsibility to speak for others, to find community of some kind with them. This is by no means to impose her views on others, nor is it simply to align herself with them in terms, say, of shared characteristics [a community of the same]; it is rather to offer her assertion as exemplary in some way, testing this against the responses of others, and testing her own responses against what those others themselves say.14 This is the engagement between reader and writer in the cooperative task of “conjecturing” (SW, 28), the poiesis, in Emerson’s words, of “metre-making.”15 It is a testing of the criteria of words and culture, keeping alive the search for their truth. Moreover, the text works on the reader not solely or exclusively to convince but rather to “convict” (SW, 48): the reader is caught in a position of responsibility — of a reading that destabilizes and reconstructs her native language; this condition is already an indictment. This then is to see the reader’s autonomy as inevitably tied to the political [the creation of the polis], as two sides of the same coin, and to see it as inextricably linked to the conditions of response within which the reader finds herself. The political is to this extent internal, and the words in which we find ourselves condition political participation.

**Philosophy as Translation**

With these general features in mind, let us examine further how far Cavell’s ordinary language philosophy can respond to the problems of the “we,” specifically through his pondering of the idea of philosophy as translation.16 Cavell refers to the notion of translation sporadically, but the concept permeates his writings. For example, “Walden,” he writes, “can be taken as a whole to be precisely

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about the problem of translation, call it transfiguration from one form of life to another."\(^{17}\) The accent here is at once religious and Wittgensteinian. A form of life cannot be realized except through the specifics of particular language-games, and given that these are language-games and that the rules of language are such as to leave continuously open the possibility of innovation (indeed it is inevitable), they are always themselves in transition or on the way. Such a life cannot be realized in one language-game alone: one must move between language-games that, by their very nature, will be more or less incommensurable. This, as Ludwig Wittgenstein shows in the *Philosophical Investigations*, is the human condition.\(^{18}\) By transfiguring and broadening the concept of translation, Cavell presents us with the idea of *philosophy as translation*, such that it is a task of "philosophy to make human existence, or show it to be, strange to itself."\(^{19}\) Such a sensitization is something to be found in some of the texts that Cavell most values — not least in the *Philosophical Investigations*: some of the figures with which Wittgenstein populates this text — monosyllabic builders, a lion that speaks, a rose with no teeth — strain the limits of what we can imagine our language to be, thereby revealing the terms of our condition. And so also of Emerson’s exemplary prose Cavell writes, “his language is hence in continuous struggle with itself, as if he is having to translate, in his American idiom, English into English.”\(^{20}\)

Translation here is not well understood if it is assumed to depend upon a binary contrast between, on the one hand, an original pure language and, on the other, a foreign language that can be juxtaposed, subordinate, against the original. Rather, the thought is that translation is something that is already woven into the process of the acquisition of the original language. It is not just that languages never as a matter of fact exist in some pure unmediated form, uncontaminated by influence from the outside; it is also that the idea that they might is predicated on metaphysical assumptions about the relation between language and world, and about the nature of meaning, that lose sight of language’s ongoing, evolving, fluid nature. If this is so, language is already in translation, in movement in our condition; and we, in turn, are already in translation.

Cavell’s idea of philosophy as translation destabilizes also the illusion of immediacy — typically observed in the Deweyan discourse of "face-to-face dialogue." In a manner significantly different from, though not necessarily in conflict with, that of Jacques Derrida, it reconfigures the relation between speech and writing. While superficially it may appear that Cavell’s emphasis on voice is

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tantamount to a rebuttal of Derrida’s thematization of writing, its target is more accurately identified in philosophy’s craving for generality, its predilection for the impersonal third-person voice, and its ancient hostility to literature. In this light voice functions not as a contrast with writing but to show metonymically how far the “I” is at stake in the language in which it finds itself and in the return it thereby makes to its community with others. According to Cavell, “writing appears in Walden not as an extension but as an experience of speech.” In other words, writing, or experience of the written language, is a reengagement with the mother tongue (which is represented most obviously by speech), a reengagement that, in Thoreau, warrants the name of the “father tongue” (SW, 15–16). The acquisition of, or immersion in, the father tongue constitutes a rebirth; yet this is not a unique, singular event, but a daily baptism, a daily requirement that our right relation to language exacts. This recovery of language involves the very process of translation, of a “discontinuous reconstitution of what has been said, a recounting of the past, autobiographizing, deriving words from yourself.” Finding one’s language means taking what is given and adding something new. Translation in this broader and perhaps more originary sense is not merely an exchange between a familiar native tongue and a foreign native tongue, but something already conditioning the process of acquiring a tongue at all. This means that the experience of translation has always already taken place within ourselves; or, say, that we ourselves are necessarily implicated in translation.

These features of philosophy as translation represent Cavell’s antifoundationalism: they neither solidify the ground of language nor, in the rigorous challenge of measure-making, abrogate the search for common ground. This is most typically illustrated in his reiteration of the Emersonian idea of finding as founding — “foundation reaches no farther than each issue of finding” — and in his Thoreauvian sense that “the volatile truth of our words should continually betray the inadequacy of the residual statement. Their truth is translated; its literal monument alone remains.” This recognition that our words can succumb to a condition of fixity or fixation, which resonates so clearly with the distinction drawn by Emmanuel Levinas between the saying (le Dire) and the said (le Dit), is not the only point at which Cavell’s relation to poststructuralist lines of thought


23. Ibid.


is apparent.\textsuperscript{26} Thus, while, on the one hand, Cavell’s antifoundationalism should be distinguished from Dewey’s pragmatist antifoundationalism, his coining of "deconfounding" both alludes to deconstruction and signals a resistance to any position too neatly so described. And the word bears some examination, for if the root term here suggests the idea of a founding, and hence finding as founding, it also says rather more than this. Such a founding, as we have seen, is a confounding, a finding together through the projection of our words, in an ongoing aspiration toward the common; yet this is also a process through which we are confounded, which is to say a process to and through which we are damned — say, by the fixity of our words or by the consolidation of the "we." While such a thought of our fatedness to language and to the other can scarcely fail to echo Sartre’s "L’enfer, c’est les autres" ("Hell, it’s other people"\textsuperscript{27}), the thought at work here is altogether more intricate. If, as Derrida said, deconstruction does not negate but rather includes construction, so our deconfounding incorporates both our founding together and our being confounded. And yet the force of the prefix is to undo both of these (apparently contradictory) movements: it unsettles our tendencies toward consolidation, and it is the mode of our release from our damnation. A good reading deconfounds, and this is the condition of the political participation we need.

This elaboration of the idea of deconfounding, in the context of Cavell’s ordinary language philosophy, realizes with more subtlety and in greater depth the way that the "I" is as inevitable as the "we." Hence, "I" as a responsible agent, with its expression through "my voice," is an ‘I’ whose autonomy is not to be reduced to the conventional liberal terms of the abstract, third-person individual. Cavell’s idea of language in translation lays the ground for an alternative understanding of language that transcends the prevailing monolingualism of political discourse.

Skepticism and Dissolution

In his book \textit{Cities of Words}, Cavell observes that "Despair is a political emotion, discouraging both participation and patience."\textsuperscript{28} What distinguishes Cavell’s language from many other forms of political discourse is its persistent sense of dissonance and destabilization. In part this is derived from his distinctive approach to skepticism, the most sustained theme in his work. His Emersonian dual sense of tragedy and hope, and his Wittgensteinian emphasis not on the solving of problems but rather on their "dissolving," make possible an alternative language whose appeal is to a more subtle responsiveness on the part of the reader and that acknowledges more fully in the human condition the proximity of despair. Such thoughts speak directly to the latent nihilism of our times. In comparing his own work to Dewey’s pragmatist position and style of writing,
Cavell has said, “for my taste pragmatism misses the depth of human restiveness, or say misses the daily, insistent split in the self that being human cannot, without harm to itself, escape.” The riven is missing from Dewey’s writing, and Cavell attributes this lack to the pragmatist preoccupation with problem solving. Yet Wittgenstein dissolved problems only to allow them to start up again. The fly escapes from the fly-bottle only to return. Philosophy achieves peace but becomes restive again. The problem never simply goes away. This is tantamount to an acknowledgment not of the truth of skepticism but of the truth in skepticism; this is, as it were, not an epistemological but an existential truth. Skepticism then testifies to something deep in the human condition: our compulsion to doubt; our inclination to demand a reassurance greater than the circumstances allow or a verification more robust than they could reasonably bear. And so our failures are not failures of knowledge so much as failures of acknowledgment. As Putnam has put this, “our fundamental relation to the world, Cavell teaches us, isn’t one of knowledge but of acknowledgment.” It is this sense of skepticism, with its emphasis on acknowledgment rather than knowledge, that distinguishes Cavell’s position radically from the politics of recognition (a knowing relation). It also marks more subtly a difference from Derrida: Cavell snipes at Derrida’s notion of “deferral,” the idea that eternal prorogation is inevitable; by contrast, Cavell responds more fully to the sense of a deadlock, of being stopped short, and to the ensuing anxiety over what cannot be said.

Far from received notions of “narrative research,” with its imagined accumulation of the experience of a life, the idea here of philosophy as “autobiographizing, deriving words from yourself,” which, as we saw, is precisely the kind of authentication ordinary language philosophy seeks, is such as to release and realize some sense of the strange tension that exists between the groundlessness of being human — that is, its null basis — and the unknowable excess of the self. Recounting the past in the autobiographical exercises of writing and reading requires “borrowing” language from one’s parents and “burying” one’s identity, where the Freudian resonances of “burying” gesture toward the inevitable violence of language’s fixations but also to the cutting and dividing that is the very condition of meaning, the realizing of difference. In this light, finding one’s self necessitates losing one’s self, to find the “non-I” within the “I.” What shall it profit me if I gain autonomy but lose this “non-I” that is still myself, a condition of my becoming? The self is one’s own, and yet at

29. Ibid., 5.
33. Of the several figures for this in Walden perhaps the most suggestive and sustained is Thoreau’s hoeing of the earth to sow his beans.
the same time not fully one's own — being always already in relation with the
other, the unknowable and unidentifiable within and without the self. This is
restated in Cavell’s Emersonian account of the self as “always and never ours,”
as “unattained but attainable.” The possessive form of “one’s own” or “one’s
self” is opened to the other in borrowing and indebtedness. Cavell contrasts
Thoreau’s saying that “it is difficult to begin without borrowing” with Nietzsche’s
idea of “celebrating his origins by burying something of himself.” Inheriting
language, “treasonously,” from one’s elders involves a process of translation as
treason. Here translation is related crucially to ideas of stealing and transgression.
Losing and burying one’s identity, with complications of giving and misgiving,
make any autobiographical exercise a work of mourning — even though this
mourning over loss may also be the moment of morning and the time for
rebirth. It is in this sense, at least, that the politics of interpretation may be
“therapeutic.”

The kind of autobiographical exercise of reading and writing that Cavell
advocates is geared not to describing the “real me,” but rather to something
like a “dissolution” of the self. It is the process of acquiring the standpoint of
the double within the self. Reading and writing are then the processes through
which one learns to be “next to” oneself (SW, 104), to be, as Thoreau put
it, beside oneself “in a sane sense” (SW, 102). Thus, the “phenomenology”
embedded in Thoreau’s turning of this figure of colloquial speech anticipates by
the better part of a century Martin Heidegger’s elaboration of the “ec-static”
nature of Dasein, incorporating into sanity the thread of madness — of “being
beside oneself,” being riven — that a more composed self-image would readily
deny. And it is in part a therapeutic point to see that the dissolution of the self
implicit here is to be understood in parallel to a preference for the dissolving
of problems over problem solving: in dissolution the original assumption,
perhaps having become fixated, is questioned in emerging contexts; the return
to words dismantles — deconstructs, deconfounds — whatever conditions the
problem. While the coupling of “problems” with “solving” harbors a metaphysics
of autonomous agency, operating, as it were, across a flat terrain in which
disturbances to stability are to be continually overcome in a kind of homeostasis,
the idea of dissolution suggests a “dissolution of any capitalized Self,” where the

34. Cavell, Cities of Words, 13.
35. Cavell, A Pitch of Philosophy, 44.
36. The French word traduction shows more clearly the etymological connections with being traduced
and, hence, with treachery — as does the Italian adage: traduttore traditore (translation is treason).
37. Cavell, Themes Out of School, 53.
39. See also Thoreau, Walden, 91.
40. Martin Heidegger, Being and Time, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (Oxford: Blackwell,
1962).
"I" of the "I think" is "fractured from one end to the other." In other words, this is an encounter with the irreconcilable other within the self. Once again we see that the autonomy that is then achieved, an autonomy attuned to the autonomous grammar of language, is other than the autonomy championed in political liberalism. This marks a sharp contrast also to any consolidated "we" of identity politics.

**Crossing Borders, Inmost, Outmost**

Through examining the themes of the politics of interpretation, philosophy as translation, skepticism, and dissolution, we have tried to show how Cavell’s alternative antifoundationalism provides a means for rethinking the relation of the "I" to the "we" in relation to Dewey’s aspiration toward the Great Community. The discussion has taken us beyond familiar understandings of autonomy, but at the same time, through the ideas of deconfounding and dissolution, it has opened a way beyond political discourses of solidarity.

The fatedness of the human condition to language, its necessary exposure to the other, reveals us to be implicated unavoidably in a kind of political participation, a fate that we may want to deny but from which we can never fully extricate ourselves: this goes to the heart of who we are. An Emersonian figure for the political imperative this suggests is "from the inmost to the outmost" — starting from within our psychological sense of the riven, in the face of our acknowledgment of the unknown, and always with that transitory sense of ourselves and language in translation. It is this unstable sense of transition that might constitute the groundless ground of a Cavellian political education. Such an education, we speculate, could not be confined as "civics" or as "citizenship education" for such curricular categories would already block the insight that the language we use is always at stake across the range of what we do in schools and, for that matter, in universities. The exercise of language, the progressive refinements realized in our initiation into this continuing "conversation of mankind," are always extensions of our coming to responsibility, our "education as grown-ups." In a sense, then, all education is political education, though there would be a case for claiming the special importance of the humanities on the grounds not so much that they can embrace the political as a theme but rather that they are the site where the open possibilities and consequences of language are most obviously, most extensively, to be taught and learned.

More strongly than Dewey, whose focus is on the unity and continuity of the "we," and in partial contrast to the thematization of heteronomy, the call of the Other and of hospitality to the stranger in Levinas and Derrida,


42. Emerson, *Ralph Waldo Emerson*, 131.

Cavell’s Emersonian perfectionism emphasizes the “I,” the Emersonian “great man” who contributes his disturbing voice to the community of the “we.” The “I” sustains his partiality; it is not the mere instrument of his identification. His “partiality” speaks in proto-Nietzschean fashion of his desire and, let us say, of an aristocracy of the self, as is intimated in Emerson’s essay “Self-Reliance”; but it also suggests his being a part of the whole, which, in spite of — one might say because of — Emerson’s aversion to conformism, is, as his metaphor of expanding circles connotes, always committed to finding new possibilities of commonality.

Can the account of a political education elaborated here be aligned with visions of the Great Community? What is clear is that it bypasses dichotomies of liberalism and communitarianism, and it does this more thoroughly than Dewey’s pragmatism. In resistance to the discourse of social inclusion, this politics endorses what might provocatively be called citizenship without inclusion. The good society will be one where a necessary condition for living together is a degree of irritability: one must come to accept as inevitable a degree of political disappointment; one must no longer necessarily expect to like (or be like) one’s neighbors, the people with whom one is committed to living. So too, such an education finds itself at odds with a certain humanistic call to cosmopolitanism; it requires instead “shunning the cosmopolitan and embracing the immigrant in yourself” (SW, 58) — call this an ongoing incursion into the stabilities and fixations of ego and identity. The destabilization of the idea of home and of the immediacy of the mother tongue is the condition required for creating the space for deviation, a deviation necessary to culture’s continual transition. Such an education goes against assimilation and cosmopolitan unity, the confluence of ways of life and thought that are at the heart of the consolidated “we.” Its borders are crossed within.

44. Emerson, *Ralph Waldo Emerson*, 166.
