

## The Politics of Interpretation: Art and Social Engagement in Cavell, Heidegger, and Thoreau

### I. INTRODUCTION

Heidegger's conception of the self seems, on the surface, to imply a paradox: he posits both individuality and sociality as simultaneous and essential facts constituting the self. Though, or perhaps because, he is famously critical of the Cartesian picture of subjectivity — and thus of common conceptions of individuality and sociality — his understanding of the self includes two substitute concepts — mineness and Being-with-others — that seem at odds. The result, and the difficulty he navigates in *Being and Time*, concerns how to uncover one's self in the face of society. The result is a theory in which one must “find” oneself within the public. It is what I will call a dynamic subjectivity in which there is no pure distinction between self and world, but one that is constantly in flux.

But with this conception of the self, art and politics bear a special relation. Interpreting art to uncover new ideas or new readings becomes an act that, in disclosing insights into the public one inhabits, helps disclose one's self to oneself. In other words, it is an act of social engagement that is integral to the fundamental interrelation of self and society (or self and the public we-world, as Heidegger might say). As such, art criticism becomes a specifically political act.

Stanley Cavell's reading of *Walden* is an informative example of this form of criticism. His particular understanding of interpretation — a method he calls ‘re-inheritance’ — elucidates Heideggerian sociality by drawing out these questions in Thoreau's work. Cavell reads these philosophical dilemmas into *Walden*, though he does so without mentioning Heidegger specifically, and explicitly comments on the book's political nature.

In this paper, I will highlight Heidegger's problematic and then detail Cavell's reading of *Walden* to begin to show how Cavell, via Thoreau, highlights the same questions. I will then demonstrate how the method of re-inheritance lies at the core of both Cavell's interpretive work *and* the political insights he and Thoreau have. In doing so, I hope to show that this method of aesthetic interpretation intimates the beginnings of a political theory.

### II. HEIDEGGER'S SOCIALITY

Heidegger claims that Dasein, his term for the subject, has an “issue” of possibility.<sup>1</sup> It must determine how to live by choosing among possible ways of living. But it must determine these possibilities *itself*. As Heidegger says: “In determining itself as an entity, Dasein always does so in the light of a possibility which it *is* itself.”<sup>2</sup> As such, “because Dasein is in each case essentially its own possibility, it *can*, in its very Being, ‘choose’ itself and win itself; it can also lose itself and never win itself; or only ‘seem’ to do so.”<sup>3</sup> But because Dasein is doing so *itself*, “any Dasein whatsoever is characterized by mineness.”<sup>4</sup> This ‘mineness’ stems from Dasein's relation to *its own* possibilities and demonstrates how, in that way, each Dasein must be a distinct individual.

But Heidegger also claims that Dasein is inherently and essentially social. He characterizes this claim with the concept of ‘thrownness.’ In his words: “As the potentiality-for-Being which it *is*, it has to let such possibilities pass by; it is constantly waiving the possibilities of its Being, or else it seizes upon them and makes mistakes. But this means that Dasein is

Being-possible which has been delivered over to itself — *thrown possibility* through and through.”<sup>5</sup> That is, Dasein finds itself always already in a social world that delimits its possibilities. Dasein *is* its *own* potentiality, but that potentiality is given concrete substance only because Dasein is forced into a particular set of possibilities.

Heidegger elaborates: “The world of Dasein is a *with-world*. Being-in [the world] is *Being-with Others*.”<sup>6</sup> A constitutive component of Dasein is that it engages with other Dasein. Its essential characteristics include navigating a social world, even if it is also characterized by mineness. This fact becomes more apparent in Heidegger’s definition of world, which is neither Nature nor a collection of things, but rather “one’s own closest environment” or the “‘public’ we-world.”<sup>7</sup> The examples Heidegger often uses to clarify this include the world of academics or a workshop — a matrix in which particular things gain their significance from the mode of living undertaken there. But this kind of world contains an inherent sociality or publicness — it only exists in the relations between various individuals.

The precise relation between the constitutive facts that both individualize Dasein and make it social or public thus seems obscure. But the way Heidegger avoids the common Cartesian worldview is already becoming clear: there is no clear division between subject and objects, between individual and society. Rather, the kind of subjectivity (if that term can be preserved) Heidegger explains is a kind that oscillates between the two poles; a kind in which Dasein is constituted by both its individualized possibilities and its social, public world.

Heidegger’s understanding of Dasein’s typical mode of interaction — its ‘everyday’ mode of being — further clarifies this reading of *Being and Time*. Heidegger terms this mode ‘Das Man’ or ‘the “they”’, alluding to the universal “they” in common phrases such as “they say that” or the abstract “one” referred to when we claim that “one will often do such and such.” Heidegger claims that “Dasein, as everyday Being-with-one-another, stands in *subjection* to Others.”<sup>8</sup> Thus, “[t]he ‘who’ [of Dasein] is the neuter, *the “they.”*”<sup>9</sup> In other words, Dasein is normally, in Being-with others, dominated by them. It has its possibilities not just outlined, but determined by the “they.”

For this reason, Heidegger states: “Everyone is the other, and no one is himself. The “they” [...] is the “*nobody*” to whom every Dasein has already surrendered itself in Being-among-one-another.”<sup>10</sup> In this everyday mode, Dasein is determined by the sociality of the “they” and its mineness and individuality are lost to the namelessness of the indeterminate public. Dasein is “*dispersed*”, de-individualized in the “they.”<sup>11</sup> It is “[i]n this inconspicuousness and unascertainability [that] the real dictatorship of the ‘they’ is unfolded.”<sup>12</sup>

A gloss on the concept of authenticity further clarifies this reading of the Heideggerian self. To see how, I will begin by explaining how Heidegger further complicates the picture by claiming that this de-individualization — which Heidegger also refers to as a “disburdening” of Dasein’s constitutive mineness — is the basis of inauthenticity. “In these modes,” Heidegger says, “one’s way of Being is that of inauthenticity and failure to stand by oneself.”<sup>13</sup> By disburdening itself of its basic, fundamental structure — having its own Being at issue to decide for itself — Dasein is “covering up” its own essential way of Being. To be authentic, Dasein thus “must first find itself” within the “they.”<sup>14</sup>

Yet Heidegger also claims that “[t]he ‘in-’ of “inauthentic” does not mean that Dasein cuts itself off from its Self and understands ‘only’ the world. The world belongs to Being-one’s-Self as Being-in-the-world.”<sup>15</sup> That is, *even Dasein’s constitutive inauthenticity is involved in deciding upon its own possibilities*. The “they”, though it covers up Dasein’s mineness, is nonetheless also a constitutive part of Dasein.

Authenticity, then, involves Dasein recognizing its own basic *structure* and fighting its tendency towards inauthenticity in the shape of the “they.” Heidegger describes this in terms of an ‘uncovering’ or ‘clearing’:<sup>16</sup>

If Dasein discovers the world in its own way and brings it close, if it discloses to itself its own authentic Being, then this discovery of the ‘world’ and this disclosure of Dasein are always accomplished as a clearing-away of

concealments and obscurities, as a breaking up of the disguises with which Dasein bars its own way.<sup>17</sup>

The disguises that must be cleared away are the “they” — but it would be a mistake to think that these disguises could be destroyed for good. It is rather a continual movement at the heart of Dasein’s constitution. Mineness and the disburdening of mineness through the public world are both constitutive of the self. In other words, when one is authentic one is not authentic to a static thing, but rather to a dynamic process of continual uncovering (or recovery, as Cavell will claim about *Walden*).<sup>18</sup>

It is as though Heidegger is describing an icy slope that houses Dasein: it always tends toward the bottom of the hill and must continually climb to maintain its position. In the same way, Dasein tends toward inauthenticity and must continually search for and find itself to maintain its individuality in the face of the public, social world. But this picture, in its totality, is the nature of Heidegger’s self — not just the totally individualized self at the top of the hill, but the dynamic process of the climb itself.

But, given this structure, it is still unclear *how* exactly a person could live authentically and engage with others in an authentic way. The problem can be put this way: If it is essential to Dasein that it is always already in a world with others — if its mode of Being is Being-with — how is it to engage with those others without being dominated by them (in the form of the “they”)?

### III. WALDEN’S SOCIALITY

The answer to Heidegger’s problematic is contained in Cavell’s fundamental claim about *Walden*: “To discover how to earn and spend our most wakeful hours — whatever we are doing — is the task of *Walden* as a whole.”<sup>19</sup> In other words, Thoreau is living deliberately. He is not separating from the everyday and thinking abstractly about life. Rather, he delves into the everyday — the very mode of existence Heidegger was concerned with in the phenomena of the “they” — and aims to understand what is contained within it. “*Walden* [...] begins with a stripping away of false necessities.”<sup>20</sup> In so doing, Thoreau is letting the fundamental ontological structures of life’s true necessities reveal themselves. He is uncovering — clearing away — that basic structure hidden in the everyday.

Cavell then claims that “[t]he quest of this book is for the *recovery of the self*.”<sup>21</sup> Just as Heidegger asks Dasein to exist as its self and not as the “they”, Cavell interprets Thoreau as an example of how to disclose one’s own possibilities and live as one’s self. In Thoreau’s words:

I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived. I did not wish to live what was not life, living is so dear; nor did I wish to practice resignation, unless it was quite necessary. I wanted to live deep and suck out all the marrow of life [...] and reduce it to its lowest terms, and, if it proved to be mean, why then to get the whole and genuine meanness of it, and publish its meanness to the world.<sup>22</sup>

Thoreau not only engages with the everyday, but also searches for his own terms of living. According to Cavell, Thoreau’s “experiment is the present — to make *himself present* to each circumstance, at every eventuality; since he is writing, in each significant mark.”<sup>23</sup> In a Heideggerian light, this means that Thoreau sifts through the possibilities provided by the “they” to find his own mineness, refusing to ‘resign’ to what the “they” offers him.

But the fact that Thoreau includes “publishing [it] to the world” as a component in his way of living shows, against the cartoon surface readings of *Walden*, that Thoreau maintains a strong engagement with society: “[T]he secrets of his trade are the ones his neighbors keep.”<sup>24</sup>

His concern is not *merely* himself, but *also* the society he lives in. Such an aim must be the case in order for Thoreau, introducing an important symbol, to claim: “I do not propose to write an ode to dejection, but to brag as lustily as a chanticleer in the morning, standing on his roost, if only to *wake my neighbors up*.”<sup>25</sup> Cavell then notes, “[t]his is one way I understand the writer’s placing himself ‘one mile from any neighbor.’ It was just far enough to be seen clearly.”<sup>26</sup> To read Heidegger into Cavell again, Thoreau is not ‘cutting himself off from the world,’ but recognizing that he — his self — is inextricably tied to the public he lives in.

In other words, sociality itself is one of the facts Thoreau aims to live deliberately. He does not cover over his neighbors, but recognizes his ties to them in such a way that he can enact his own individuality and embrace his constitutive potentiality. He admits that his everyday mode is the “they”, embraces his ties to his society, and *in doing so* searches for an individual way to determine how to live. This is what Cavell refers to when he points to “another underlying perception, or paradox, of *Walden* as a whole — that what is most intimate is what is furthest away; the realization of ‘our own infinite relations,’ our kinships, is an endless realization of our separateness.”<sup>27</sup> Cavell does not discuss the “they”, but the bounds of this separateness are nonetheless defined by its structure.

But, again, this is also Heidegger’s problematic. He asks that individual Dasein account for its thrown possibility, for always already Being-with others and having its possibilities tied to those others, while, at the same time, keeping its own possibilities open. “In one’s coming back resolutely [authentically] to one’s thrownness, there is hidden a *handing down* to oneself of the possibilities that have come down to one, but not necessarily *as* having thus come down,” Heidegger says, cryptically.<sup>28</sup> This is exactly what Thoreau aims to do: engage with his society by taking it up in a new, individualistic way. One must accept one’s sociality, but that does not mean one must accept it *in the way it is originally presented*. The method Cavell elucidates from Thoreau, and recreates in doing so, demonstrates this thought of Heidegger’s, giving a clear image of how to concretely live, in a society, in light of Heidegger’s conception of the self.

#### IV. THE METHOD OF RE-INHERITANCE

Thoreau, as read by Cavell, takes the need to critically examine his society as the basis of his experiment at Walden Pond: he is *re-inheriting* the things he has received from his society. This method is one aspect of living deliberately: one discovers the ordinary and engages it in novel ways. Discussing Thoreau’s literary ambitions, Cavell posits: “Writing — heroic writing, the writing of a nation’s scripture — must assume the conditions of language as such, *re-experience*, as it were, the fact that there is such a thing as language at all and *assume responsibility for it* — find a way to acknowledge it.”<sup>29</sup> In other words, Thoreau burdens himself with the need to communicate with his neighbors. He acknowledges the social structure of language itself, but still accepts his individual responsibility for the possibilities of its use. Cavell, moving more directly into his philosophy, explains this in terms of discourse:

Speaking together face to face can seem to deny that distance [between the two speakers], to deny that facing one another requires acknowledging that presence of the other, revealing our positions, betraying them if need be. But to deny such things is to deny our separateness. *And that makes fictions of one another.*<sup>30</sup>

Thoreau’s experiment and Cavell’s theory of discourse and acknowledgement ensure the space for authentic engagement with society, with the ‘public we-world.’ Their methods allow every individual to take issue with her own mode of being and her own possibilities, and, in doing so, to be authentic, to be more than a fiction given by the “they.” But the very purpose of this individuality is the possibility of authentic, substantial interactions between

individuals. (Cavell's formulation, in this light, touches on the Heideggerian phenomenon of idle talk — a specific mode of inauthentic everydayness.<sup>31</sup>)

Cavell also notes that such distancing requires accepting that “[words] were there before we were; we are born into them.”<sup>32</sup> Cavell's philosophy of language once again trades on an essential Heideggerian claim: that we are always already social beings limited by our particular society. By acknowledging this structure, these social possibilities can be taken up by each individual. How one re-inherits one's language demonstrates one's activation of one's mineness *and* one's acceptance, one's acknowledgement of one's constitutive sociality, even its inauthentic forms. Cavell's method of communication, in that way, enables authenticity.

Cavell presents this idea in many different ways throughout his corpus. He points, in *The Claim of Reason*, to skepticism about the nature of a ‘we’ in Wittgensteinian philosophizing. In “Music Discomposed,” for example, he discusses the need for artistic styles to engage with and alter their traditions, not break with them entirely. And in *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome*, while directly acknowledging a debt to Heidegger, Cavell presents his theory of moral perfectionism, claiming that one moves from a “current self” to a “next self” while explicitly rejecting the idea that there is a “final self.” In other words, Cavell claims what I have claimed about Heidegger: the self is a continual, unceasing process, and that in that process one must engage with one's society, even its inauthentic, everyday forms. Doing so, Cavell claims, is a condition of being human, of being a self.<sup>33</sup>

But it is important that, here, Cavell does not present his philosophy in a tract, but through literary criticism. That fact further demonstrates the method of re-inheritance — *Senses of Walden* itself is an example of the philosophy it argues for. Obviously *Walden*, published in 1854, does not draw on the dilemmas Heidegger laid out in 1927. But Cavell interprets Thoreau's work, reinvigorating it with the philosophical questions of the twentieth century. By re-inheriting *Walden* — a work he takes to be an American epic — Cavell continues the project Thoreau began at Walden Pond. He questions his own society not to dispute his sociality, but to find his mineness within it. In that way, *Senses of Walden* is an extension of *Walden*. In each case — Thoreau's experiment, Cavell's criticism — cultural items are imbued with individualized meaning and a new self is uncovered. To gain *only* enough distance from the “they” to find something new within it: that is the method of re-inheritance.

## V. TOWARD POLITICAL WALDENS

This method hints at the structure of what might be called an authentic politics. Cavell concludes that “America exists only in its discovery.”<sup>34</sup> America, as a cultural and political entity, only exists inasmuch as its very meaning is continually transformed.<sup>35</sup> Its people, following Thoreau's example and method, must burden themselves anew with their heritage to rediscover the individuality so tied to the frontier mythos.

In other words, Cavell critiques “a sort of disease of the imagination [...] of the public imagination we may call politics.”<sup>36</sup> As the state ossifies, its people lose the issue of their Being. They lose their selves to the public. Critiquing the banalities of political speech in contemporary American politics, Cavell claims, “The air of the formulaic or encrusted is itself deadening.”<sup>37</sup> Everyday modes of being have begun to dominate the way individuals understand the nature of their selves. These airs spread to art and culture as well, as Thoreau so forcefully claimed in *Walden*.

But, through art, Thoreau redefined the political community by finding a way to keep his, and his neighbors', constitutive possibilities open. As such, “*Walden* is, among other things, a tract of political education, education for membership in the polis. It locates authority in the citizens and it identifies citizens — those with whom one is in membership — as ‘neighbors.’ *What it shows is that education for citizenship is education for isolation.*”<sup>38</sup> In ‘clarifying ourselves’ we shape our social inheritance, an inheritance continually shifting as we continually find ourselves within that inheritance, and thus we balance our constitutive sociality and our inherent individuality. By understanding ourselves in an authentic way —

recognizing the dynamic structure defining us — we give a new basis to our engagement with each other.

This method of aesthetic interpretation thus implies a political corollary: the nature of re-inheritance both shapes art and, in doing so, shapes the political actions arising from one's social engagement. Both arise from the movement between sociality and individuality that Heidegger posits as a constitutive fact about Dasein. In short, re-inheritance is a method of action that guides both art and politics, and thus, as Cavell shows through his engagement with Thoreau, demonstrates the occasions in which the two fields become both at once.

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<sup>1</sup> Calling Dasein 'the subject' may be controversial. My aim in doing so is merely to highlight that Heidegger's concept of Dasein replaces the subject with the kind of dynamic subjectivity I will be glossing throughout this section. The differences between Heidegger's conception and typical conceptions of the subject are vast, but I hope that highlighting how Dasein is a kind of subject, albeit with those important differences, will clarify my reading of Heidegger. My thanks to Espen Hammer for pushing me to clarify this point.

<sup>2</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (New York: Harper, 2008), 69/H43. (Page numbers of the later German editions are noted with an 'H.')

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 68/H42.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 183/H144.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 155/H118. Being-in-the-world is an important concept to which Heidegger devotes Division I, Chapter 2. For my purposes here it can be summarized by what was just said: Dasein is always already in a world.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 93/H65.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 164/H126.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 165-6/H128.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 167/H129.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 164/H126.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 166/H128.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 167/H129.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 186/H146.

<sup>16</sup> This term, interestingly, will be used by Thoreau as well.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 167/H129.

<sup>18</sup> There is, as always, much more to say about Heidegger's notion of authenticity than I have said here. Unfortunately, the constraints of this paper have forced me to shorten a discussion that could use far more detail.

<sup>19</sup> Stanley Cavell, *The Senses of Walden: An Expanded Edition* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1992), 5.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 87.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 80. Emphasis mine.

<sup>22</sup> Henry D. Thoreau, *Walden*, ed. Jeffrey S. Cramer (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), 97.

<sup>23</sup> Cavell, *The Senses of Walden*, 61.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 57.

<sup>25</sup> Thoreau, *Walden*, 90. Emphasis mine.

<sup>26</sup> Cavell, *The Senses of Walden*, 11.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 54.

<sup>28</sup> Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 435/H383.

<sup>29</sup> Cavell, *The Senses of Walden*, 33. Emphasis mine. Cavell reads Thoreau through many spiritual and religious images that I will ignore in this paper.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 65. Emphasis mine.

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<sup>31</sup> See Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 211-14.

<sup>32</sup> Cavell, *The Senses of Walden*, 64.

<sup>33</sup> These claims and their relation to the issue of the self are worked out in detail in a longer version of this paper. Unfortunately, due to space constraints, I can only point to these other Cavellian themes.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

<sup>35</sup> Cavell ties this, in the same sentence, to the history of America's founding. Such a claim, by connecting the history of America directly to the understanding of the self I focus on in this paper, puts an interesting emphasis on the question of American exceptionalism, a question that is often raised by Cavell's writings. But that question is too far afield to be addressed here.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 73.

<sup>37</sup> Stanley Cavell, "The Incessance and the Absence of the Political," in *The Claim to Community*, ed. Andrew Norris (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006), 268.

<sup>38</sup> Cavell, *The Senses of Walden*, 85-6. Emphasis mine.

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