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Transcendentalism and the Ordinary

For Stanley Cavell, the specific and contemporary theme of the ordinary sets off from America and the transcendentalism of Emerson and Thoreau, in order to reinvent itself in Europe with ordinary language philosophy – Wittgenstein and Austin. But in order to understand this, it is necessary to perceive what Cavell calls, inspired by Wittgenstein and Thoreau, "the uncanniness of the ordinary," inherent to its anthropological thematization. In his preface to the recent work of Veena Das, *Life and Words*, Cavell (2007) notes that the ordinary is our ordinary language in so far as we constantly render it foreign to ourselves, which invokes the Wittgensteinian image of the philosopher as explorer of a foreign tribe: this tribe, it is we who are foreigners and strange to ourselves – "at home perhaps nowhere, perhaps anywhere." This intersection of the familiar and the strange, shared by anthropology and philosophy, is the location of the ordinary:

> Wittgenstein's anthropological perspective is one puzzled in principle by anything human beings say and do, hence perhaps, at a moment, by nothing.

The ordinary does not exactly mean common. It is not determined by a web of beliefs, or of shared dispositions. Common language, the fact of being able to speak together, nevertheless defines the ordinary: between the ordinary (everyday, shared life) and ordinary language, between the proximity to ordinary life called for in American transcendentalism, in film and literature which inherit it and the ordinary language philosophy of Wittgenstein and Oxford, the ordinary is the search for a new land to discover and explore, then to describe. The thought of the ordinary is experimental: in aiming to describe ordinary experience, it brings together words and world. From Emerson to Wittgenstein, from Austin to Goffman, we will attempt to retrace these routes and to make heard these contemporary and unrecognized voices of the ordinary, which demand new forms of attention to the human form of life and another understanding of pragmatism.

"I ask not for the great, the remote, the romantic…"

Let us start from Concord, and from the hypothesis of Cavell: that the distinctive feature of American thought, its capacity to begin philosophy again in America, is found in its invention of the ordinary. This new departure of philosophy – which has nothing of the clean slate to it, but rather, like the Hollywood "remarriage" comedies, it has to do with a second chance – is a reversal of philosophy's two inveterate tendencies: the denial of our ordinary language and of our ordinariness in the philosophical pretension to go beyond them, to correct them, or again the philosophical pretension to know what we want to say, what is common to us. The call to the ordinary, or the return to practices is neither evidence nor solution, as certain varieties of empiricism or sociology suggest: it is traversed by the "uncanniness of the ordinary."

It is from this perspective that it is necessary to register Cavell's return to American authors such as Emerson and Thoreau. Emerson, founding father of American philosophy, asserts the intellectual independence of America, the appropriation of the ordinary in contrast to the sublimities inherited from Europe, in a passage of his famous address, "The American Scholar":

> I ask not for the great, the remote, the romantic; what is doing in Italy or Arabia; what is Greek art or Provençal minstrelry; I embrace the common, I explore and sit at the feet of the familiar, the low. Give me insight into today, and you may have the antique and future worlds. (Emerson 1837: 171)

Admittedly, recourse to the "common", to the "low" has existed for a long time in philosophy, and plays a central role in English thought. But there is a new accent on the ordinary here. It is not a matter of praising common sense but of bringing back all thought to the ordinary, to those categories of the ordinary – the low, the close at hand - which precisely stand in opposition to the great and the remote, and allow for "knowing the meaning" of ordinary life…

> What would we really know the meaning of? The meal in the firkin; the milk in the pan; the ballad in the street; the news of the boat; the glance of the eye; the form and the gait of the body (ibid.).

Emerson expresses here the demand for a distinctive American culture, as an alternative to European culture, and which would be defined by this positive aspiration for the common. He described, in advance, the privileged objects of American film, or those of photography, as though it were necessary to renounce "sophisticated" European art in order to envisage truly American ordinary art.

> His list in "The American Scholar" of the matters whose "ultimate reason" he demands of students to know – […] – is a list epitomizing what we may call the physiognomy of the ordinary, a form of what Kierkegaard calls the perception of the sublime in the everyday. It is a list, made three or four years before Daguerre will exhibit his copper plates in Paris, epitomizing the obsessions of photography (Cavell 1972: 150).

It is not only a matter of art in this aesthetic of the ordinary, but of perception of reality. There is the elaboration of a list of new categories, those of the ordinary, more precisely of the elements of a physiognomy, of a gait, or of a 'look' of the ordinary, that philosophy, but also film and photography, would have to describe. It is as if the classic transcendental question has transformed itself: the question is no longer about knowing the "ultimate reason" of the phenomena of nature, but of establishing a connection to ordinary life and to its details, its particularities. For Emerson, this new approach, particularist and perceptual, is inseparable from a new relationship between classes, from a democratization even of perception.

> One of these signs is the fact that the same movement which effected the elevation of what was called the lowest class in the state, assumed in literature a very marked and as benign an aspect. Instead of the sublime and beautiful, the near, the low, the common, was explored and poeticized. That which had been negligently trodden under foot by those who were harnessing and provisioning themselves for long journeys into far countries, is suddenly found to be richer than all foreign parts. The literature of the poor,

> the feelings of the child, the philosophy of the street, the meaning of household life, are the topics of the time. (Emerson 1982 [1837]: 565)

The poor, the child, the street, the household: these are the new objects that it will be necessary to *see*. For Cavell as for Wittgenstein, the task of philosophy is to bring back the ordinary to us – to bring our words back from their metaphysical to their everyday use – which is neither easy nor obvious.

> In this he joins his thinking with the new poetry and art of his times, whose topics he characterizes as "the literature of the poor, the feelings of the child, the philosophy of the street, the meaning of the household life. I note that when he describes himself as asking "not for the great, the remote, the romantic," he is apparently not considering that the emphasis on the low and the near is exactly the opposite face of the romantic, the continued search for a new intimacy in the self's relation to its world. (Cavell, "An Emerson Mood", p. 149-150)

The search for the ordinary takes its meaning from the menace of skepticism – of the loss of or distance from the world. As he presents it at the beginning of his essay "Experience," Emerson associates this loss with the failure of speech, which by definition renders it inadequate, or unhappy – it is a matter of infelicity of language. It is this essential inadequacy of language that in "Self-Reliance," Emerson calls the conformity of his contemporaries, and that Thoreau denounces as "quiet desperation."

> Their every truth is not quite true. Their two is not the real two, their four not the real four; so that every word they say chagrins us, and we know not where to begin to set them right. (Emerson 1990: 34)

The call to the ordinary is inseparable from this skeptical moment when the world radically chagrins us, when (because) we want most strongly to grasp it, to seize it conceptually and possessively, it evades us, according to Emerson. In their defense of the ordinary against the vain wish to conceptualize and grasp reality, Emerson and Thoreau are thus the precursors of ordinary language philosophy, recommending, instead, the attentive description of reality: being next to the world (both close and separate).

> The connection means that I see both developments – ordinary language philosophy and American transcendentalism – as responses to skepticism, to that anxiety about our human capacities as knowers. My route to the connection lay at once in my tracing both the ordinary language philosophy as well as the American transcendentalists to the Kantian insight that Reason dictates what we mean by a world. (Cavell 1988a, p. 4)

Our connection to the ordinary is another way of formulating the question of our connection to reality, and of our ability to say things with our ordinary and shared language. For Emerson, America must reinvent transcendental philosophy, while following its own methods, temperaments, and moods. It must then invent an access to the ordinary, a specific mode of approach of this new nature – for which the categories of transcendental philosophy, to some extent the conceptual mode of access to nature developed by Europe, are inoperative. A new education is necessary. Thoreau puts it nicely in *Walden*:

> It is time that we had uncommon schools, that we did not leave off our education when we begin to be men and women. It is time that villages were universities. Shall the world

> be confined to one Paris or one Oxford forever? Cannot students be boarded here and get
> a liberal education under the skies of Concord? (Thoreau 1954, ch. 3)

To return to ordinary language is to speak seriously – to respect its speech, to take up the Austinian theme. It is not a matter of discovering an authentic and original meaning of words, a myth that Wittgenstein unravels in the first lines of *The Blue Book*. As Cavell says, "Words come to us from a distance; they were there before we were; we are born into them. Meaning them is accepting that fact of their condition" (1972: 64). The meaning of a word is its use – to borrow Wittgenstein's phrase: "We do not know what "Walden" means if we do not know what Walden is" (ibid. 27). And thus of all the words employed by Thoreau, to which he gives a new sense: morning (morning is when I am awakening and there is the dawn in me), the bottom of the pond (we do not know what the base is, or the foundation, so long as we have not probed, like Thoreau, the bottom of Walden Pond), the sun (a morning star).

"Discovering what is said to us, just like discovering what we say, is to discover the exact place of where it is said; to understand why it is said at this precise place, here and now" (ibid: 34). It is the education, or the method of ordinary language: to see why, when, we say what we say, in which circumstances – because without its use a word is a "dead sign" (Wittgenstein 1958: 3). It is not a matter of discovering an authentic or hidden meaning of words. Everything is already in front of us, displayed before our eyes: stay to see the visible. Thoreau thus announces, like Emerson, the anthropological project of the *Investigations*: to see the ordinary, which escaped us because it is near to us, beneath our eyes.

> What we are supplying are really remarks on the natural history of human beings; we are
> not contributing curiosities, however, but observations which no one has doubted, but
> which have escaped remark only because they are always before our eyes. [Wittgenstein,
> PI §415]

One could return to a beautiful formulation of Foucault, where the important point is that he connects this ability to "see the visible" to ordinary language philosophy and its project of using usage to discover what is actually going on : "faire une analyse critique de la pensée à partir de la manière dont on dit les choses" :

> We have long known that the role of philosophy is not to discover what is hidden, but to
> render visible what precisely is visible – which is to say, to make appear what is so close,
> so immediate, so intimately linked to ourselves that, as a consequence, we do not perceive
> it. (Foucault 1994 [1978]: 540-41)

The ordinary exists only in this characteristic difficulty of access to what is right before our eyes, and what one must learn to see. It is always an object of investigation – this will be the approach of pragmatism – and an object of interrogation; it is never given. The low always has to be reached, in an inversion of the sublime. It is not enough to want to start from the ordinary, from "the man in the street." It is not a matter of correcting the heritage of European philosophy, and of creating new categories: it is necessary to give another sense to the inherited words (such as those of experience, idea, impression, understanding, reason, necessity and condition), to bring them back from the immanent to the common, or from the metaphysical to the ordinary, which means, to make something else of them.

Emerson proposes his own version of categories, in the epigraph to "Experience", with the list of "the lords of life":

> The lords of life, the lords of life, - / I saw them pass, / In their own guise, / Like and unlike, / Portly and grim; / Use and Surprise, / Surface and Dream, / Succession swift, and Spectral Wrong. (Emerson 2005: 77)

At first glance, the lords of life resemble categories that control our life, our experience, and determine our access to the world, as with Kant – those of causality, substance, or totality. But the list demonstrates well that it cannot be [a matter of] these categories: use, surprise, surface, dream, succession, evil, temperament… In Emerson there is the idea that a new collection of concepts must be invented in order to describe the ordinary, the given or, rather, the diverse materials, "strewn along the ground." And it is a new ordinary man who will need to build or, as he says, " to domesticate."

This revolution is to be wrought by the gradual domestication of the idea of Culture. The main enterprise of the world for splendor, for extent, is the upbuilding of man. Here are the materials strewn along the ground (Emerson 1990: 178)

Categories of the ordinary, democracy of experience

If Emerson were satisfied with carrying on with the arrangement of the categories, and substituting for a traditional list (the European transcendental heritage) a modernized, Americanized list, the contribution would be weak. To imagine categories of the ordinary alters the very idea of category. The idea of domestication of culture, of the ordinary as next, as neighbor, is not the idea of mastery of reality – because the ordinary is neither conceptualized nor grasped: it is an understanding of the connection to the world, not as knowledge but as proximity and access to things, as attention to them. It is not a matter of rewriting the list of categories, but of redefining their use: not as conceptual grasping of reality, but, instead, as neighboring things. It is the recognition [of reality] as next to me, near or close, but also separated from me, next door. The revolution achieved by Emerson consists less in a re-definition or redistribution of categories than in a remodeling of what experience is, which continues from James, to Dewey and Goffman.

Hence, our relation to the world is no longer a matter of (actively) applying categories of understanding to experience but of (passively) watching the lords of life passing by in the course of experience. They will emerge from experience, suddenly appear – "I find them in my way" – as if the categories, instead of being imposed or posed, are simply to wait patiently, and to *find*:

> Illusion, Temperament, Succession, Surface, Surprise, Reality, Subjectiveness – these are threads on the loom of time, these are the lords of life. I dare not assume to give their order, but I name them as I find them in my way. (Emerson 1837: 106)

Emerson takes and subverts Kant's system. The lords of life do not control our perception, or our experience, they come out from it, like forms on a background: "I saw them pass" (Ibid). The categories themselves are the object/subject of observation and exploration. Such is the intellectual revolution brought about by transcendentalism. The transcendental question is no longer: How do we know to start from experience? (A question which, since Hume, one knows leads to the response: one knows nothing at all – and thus leads to skepticism). But rather: How do we approach the world? How do we have

an experience? This difficulty of approaching the world is expressed by Emerson in "Experience" in regard to the experience of grief, and is generalized to an experience of the world taken as a whole under the sign (the category) of loss. Skepticism is found there, in the inability to have an experience. We are not as much ignorant, as inexperienced. William James will follow this thread of Emersonian thought (for example in *The Will to Believe*), Dewey will follow it as well by proposing his own categories, and Wittgenstein probably uses it in his later writings.

In Emerson, experience cannot teach us anything, contrary to what "paltry" empiricism tells us – not because it is insufficient, that we must go beyond it, as the traditional epistemology asserts, but because it does not touch us. Our attempts to master the world and things, in order to grasp them in all senses of the term (materially and conceptually) distance us from them. It is what Emerson describes in Experience as "the most unhandsome part of our condition" (Emerson 2005: 81) – this fleeting reality slips between our fingers at the moment when, because, we clutch at it: un*hand*some. It is our desire to grasp reality that causes us to lose it, our craving to know (as theoretical appropriation and synthesis) that keeps us from ordinary proximity with things, and cancels their availability or their attractiveness (the fact that they are at hand, handsome). Emerson transforms the Kantian synthesis, not by going the transcendental way but the opposite, non romantic way, towards immanence. This surpassing of the synthesis by the low, and not by the high, is characteristic of Emerson and Thoreau. Emerson launches into an ironic recapitulation of Cartesian and Kantian themes from the European theory of knowledge:

> It is very unhappy, but too late to be helped, the discovery we have made, that we exist. That discovery is called the Fall of Man. Ever afterwards, we suspect our instruments. We have learned that we do not see directly, but mediately. (Emerson 1990: 98)

It is conceptual activity as such that must come to renounce this "cognitive rapaciousness" that is unhandsome (this hand and these fingers which clutch and clench). Let us refer to the criticism brought about by Wittgenstein in the *Blue Book* of the "craving for generality" characteristic of philosophy. The attention to the particular that Wittgenstein demands goes against our tendency toward a thorough grasp.

> We feel as if we had to *penetrate* phenomena: our investigation, however, is directed not towards phenomena, but, as one might say, towards the '*possibilities*' of phenomena. We remind ourselves, that is to say, of the kind of statement that we make about phenomena.[…] Our investigation is therefore a grammatical one. (Wittgenstein PI §90)

When Wittgenstein affirms our impression that we must visually penetrate phenomena, and when he specifies that our "grammatical" investigation is directed not towards phenomena but towards their possibilities, he intends to substitute for the categories an imaginative grammar of human concepts, a grammar of the particular. The difference with Kant is that, in Wittgenstein and Emerson, each word of ordinary language, each bit of ordinary experience, each aspect of the features of the ordinary, they each require a deduction to know its use: each one must be retraced in its application to the world, by the criteria of its application. A word, for Emerson and for Wittgenstein, must be stated in the particular context where it has a meaning, or else it is false (it sounds false), it "chagrins me." In this way, one could read the series of lords not as a renovated list of categories, but as a grammar of the particular experience.

It is in this relation to experience that Emerson (and Dewey) goes perhaps even further than Wittgenstein himself. For Wittgenstein seems, on this point, dependent on a transcendental heritage, with his idea of the "possibilities of phenomena" and his definition of grammar as constituent of these possibilities. The radical empiricism of Emerson consists in saying that speaking of the given is still too much. What interests him would be, we might say, the "found". "Finding as founding," Cavell puts it (1991:79).

The ordinary, then, is what escapes us, what is distant precisely because we seek to appropriate it to us rather than letting ourselves go to the things, and to insignificant encounters: "all our blows glance, all our hits are accidents. Our relations to each other are oblique and casual," writes Emerson in Experience. This insistence on the accidental, the contingent, situates the ambiguity of Emerson. The casual is also misfortune, fatality – hence his pun casual/casualty: our experiences may be both casual and catastrophic, and the casual structures ordinary experience, as the low and the near.

Transcendentalism is therefore badly named, because what Emerson proposes is a particular form of empiricism, which one might readily call radical empiricism. My perceptions are more reliable than my thoughts; they are fatal, escaping my desire to grasp the world. So it is from perception, conceived as attraction and as receptivity, that one will be able to imagine a framework for ordinary experience.

> Every man discriminates between the voluntary acts of his mind, and his involuntary perceptions, and knows that to his involuntary perceptions a perfect faith is due. […] But perception is not whimsical, but fatal. (Emerson 2005: 81)

The conversion that philosophy requires is not the (transcendental) passage towards another world. The new America is here, in front of me. And it is only in this ordinary world that I can change.

> Why not realize your world? But far be from me the despair which prejudges the law by a paltry empiricism – […] There is victory yet for justice; and the true romance which the world exists to realize, will be the transformation of genius into practical power. (Ibid.: 106)

To realize the world: Emerson transforms and de-sublimes the transcendental, bringing the categories back to the ordinary, realizing the "possibility" of "true romance," realizing genius into practical power. There are no longer two worlds but only one, which always and ordinarily remains for us to discover and to describe.

 It is not a ground where I could make myself at home. Emerson and Thoreau are thinkers of migration (not just of the ground or of identity): for them it is not a matter of "dwelling" but of always leaving. Starting off is what counts, being always ready to go, not attachment or rootedness, which are synonymous with being stationed, or with clutching, with clenching the nation or oneself.

> But in truth all is now to be begun, and every new mind ought to take the attitude of Columbus, launch out from the gaping loiterers on the shore, and sail west for a new world. (*The Senses and the Soul*, in Emerson 1990)

The pioneer is one of the exemplary figures of this impulse to set off. The pioneer (like Will Hunting at the end of Gus Van Sant's film by that name, or like the hero of Francis Ford Coppola's *Rumblefish*) moves toward the West, which is also the East where the sun

rises, since we now know that the Earth is round and that the sun "is but a morning star," as Thoreau puts it in the last sentence of Walden.

The importance of importance

By claiming the ordinary, Emerson calls for a revolution ("Here are the materials strewn along the ground"). The American hope becomes that of the construction of a new man and culture, both "domesticated", which is the opposite of oppressed and enslaved: the domestic man is the one who comes to harmonize his interior and his exterior, his public voice and his private voice, without renouncing one or the other. The construction of American democracy is the invention of an ordinary man: "the upbuilding of man." Public expression is then founded on self-trust, which is not trust in a pre-given self (philosophy of the ordinary is not a philosophy of subjectivity) but trust in one's experience.

To trust in one's experience: this defines the recourse to practice, in a genuinely empirical move. One could explore the political implications of this trust with the question of civil disobedience. Cavell has applied it in the first place to film and what it teaches us. In *Pursuits of Happiness*, he examines the act of "checking one's experience," which is to say, of examining one's own experience, of "let[ting] the object or the work of your interest teach you how to consider it." To educate one's experience, so as to be made educable by it. To be interested in film as works of thought means to be interested in our experience of film. That means a displacement of the object of the investigation from the object to the experience I have of the object, "the interest I bring to my own experience." It means a reliance on the experience of the object, in order to find the right words to describe and express it. For Cavell, it is the viewing (repeated and common) of films that leads to trusting one's own experience, and to acquiring at the same time an authority over it. "[It] is a conceptual as much as an experiential undertaking […]. I think of this as checking one's experience." (1981: 18). Cavell returns then to "the empiricism practiced by Emerson and Thoreau." Empiricism thus re-read defines the paradoxical link between experience and trust: it is necessary to educate one's experience in order to trust it. Here is a new reversal of the Kantian inheritance: not to go beyond experience via theory, but to go in reverse from what is, in philosophy, the very movement of knowledge; to go beyond theory via experience. The trust in self is defined by the ordinary and expressive authority one has over one's experience: "Without this trust in one's experience, expressed as a willingness to find words for it, […] one is without authority in one's own experience." (Ibid**.** 19). The trust consists of discovering in oneself (in one's "constitution," says Emerson, in the political and subjective sense) the capacity to have an experience, and to express and describe this ordinary experience. This is also the definition of ordinary experience for Wittgenstein, and what for Freud, one expects from psychoanalysis (to gather and remind, re-allocate – re-member – the scattered scraps and memories of words and uses). One finds this approach to ordinary experience as well in William James' radical empiricism, and in Dewey's theory of inquiry, and in Henry James' literary concepts: what is important is to have an experience (cf. Dewey 1934).

To have an experience means: to perceive what is important. What interests Cavell in film is the way our experience makes what counts emerge, be seen. Cavell is interested in the development of a capacity to see the importance, the appearance, and the significance of things (places, people, motifs):

> The moral I draw is this: the question what becomes of objects when they are filmed and screened – like the question what becomes of particular people, and specific locales, and subjects and motifs when they are filmed by individual makers of film – has only one source of data for its answer, namely the appearance and significance of just those objects and people that are in fact to be found in the succession of films, or passages of films, that matter to us. (Cavell, 1998b : 182-3)

What defines importance, circularly, is – "To express their appearances, and define those significances, and articulate the nature of this mattering" (Cavell, 1998b: 183).

> If it is part of the grain of film to magnify the feeling and meaning of a moment, it is equally part of it to counter this tendency, and instead to acknowledge the fateful fact of a human life that the significance of its moments is ordinarily not given with the moments as they are lived, so that to determine the significant crossroads of a life may be the work of a lifetime. (Cavell, 1998b: 11)

Experience turns out to be defined by our capacity for attention: our capacity to see the detail, the expressive gesture, even if it is not necessarily a clear and sharp picture, nor exhaustive. It is attention to what matters, to what counts in the expressions and styles of others – what makes and shows the differences between people, the relation each has to his/her experience – that we must then describe.

> To recognize restores, manners, habits, turns of speech, turns of thought, styles of face as morally expressive – of an individual or of a people. The intelligent description of life, of what matters, makes differences, in human lives. (Diamond 1991: 375)

These are the differences which must be the object of "the intelligent, sharp-eyed, description of life." This human life refers to the Wittgensteinian form of life, seen not as a social norm, but as the context where gestures, manners, and ordinary styles are visible. In this way, attention to the ordinary, "to what we would like to know the meaning of" (Emerson 1982: 564), is the perception of textures or of moral motifs. What is perceived are not objects, but expressions, which is only possible against the background of the form of life. Literature is the privileged place of this perception, through the creation of a background that reveals the important differences between the expressions. Film also for Cavell is the medium of moral expression.

It is a matter of a competence which has to do not only with knowledge or reasoning, but with learning the suitable expression, and with an education of sensibility: education of the reader's sensibility by the author, who renders such a situation, such a character perceptible, while placing it (describing it) in the appropriate framework. The novel teaches us to look at ordinary life as "the scene of adventure and improvisation", beginning with the appropriate modes of expression, linguistic or other: a development of sensitivity through exemplarity. The novel shapes our capacity to read moral expression– the capacity to make use of words to describe moral experience of the particular.

The attention that the Henry James novel suggests and provokes makes the reader's experience an adventure (in Emerson's words, "true romance"). There is adventure in any situation that mixes uncertainty and the "taste for life". James notes, regarding the novels of George Eliot, that the emotions, the tormented intelligence, and the consciousness of its heroes become "our own adventure." (see Laugier 2006)

> A human, a personal 'adventure' is no a priori, no positive and absolute and inelastic thing, but just a matter of relation and appreciation – a name we conveniently give, after the fact, to any passage, to any situation, that has added the sharp taste of uncertainty to a quickened sense of life. Therefore the thing is, all beautifully, a matter of interpretation and of the particular conditions; without a view of which latter some of the most prodigious adventures, as one has often had occasion to say, may vulgarly show for nothing. (James, 1934: 286)

Experience itself, if one trusts it, becomes an adventure. To refuse this trust is to miss out on this part of the adventure – the character's adventure, and one's own adventure. Lack of attention to experience, the failure to perceive its importance, causes one to miss out, to miss what happens. The stipulation found in the ethnomethodology will combine the heritage of Wittgenstein, Emerson, and pragmatism: Do not miss out, do not miss the thing for lack of comprehension and sensitivity to the fluctuations of the circumstances of action when it happens.

Thus one can see experience as a conceptual and sensible adventure at the same time - in other words: simultaneously passive (one lets oneself be transformed, touched) and active. In experience, there is no separating thought (spontaneity) and receptivity (vulnerability), comprehension and perception. It is this, for James, which "constitutes experience:"

> The power to guess the unseen from the seen, to trace the implication of things, to judge the whole piece by the pattern, the condition of feeling life, in general, so completely that you are well on your way to knowing any particular corner of it – this cluster of gifts may almost be said to constitute experience." (H. James "The Art of Fiction" p. 10-11).

James adds that one must let nothing escape, let nothing be wasted on oneself: "Try to be one of the people on whom nothing is lost". It also opens toward a specific capacity, for the attention or care to detail, which brings about the humanity to the description of the ordinary. (Laugier 2005)

So how are we to recover this elusive ordinary life? How are we to know what is important without being focused on only the pertinent? To realize what one wants to say, to be precisely expressed, would be to manage to put the phrase into context. To take up an expression of Wittgenstein, it would be to restore the phrase to its country of origin, its "natural environment". This is the task Wittgenstein assigns to ordinary language philosophy: "To bring words back from their metaphysical to their everyday use" (*PI* §116). But in the ordinary there is nothing to recover. Cavell says of Thoreau, "Walden was always gone, from the beginning of the words of Walden" (Cavell 1972: 119). The only assurance registered in the use of my speech, is that of abandonment, of the departure that one constantly finds in American thought – of departure, of the road. I am no longer here where one expects me. I'm not there".

If conversation is acceptance of the linguistic condition – our form of life in language – and of exposure to others, film is the privileged place for such an (over) exposure**,** and the actor has this capacity, by supporting the expression, of constituting the experience of the spectator. The experience of film becomes experience itself (as Kant says, there is only one experience), and it belongs to our ordinary existence, without constituting a separate world. Cinematographic projection proves to be the answer, through its mimesis of ordinary conversation, to skeptical questioning, to the philosophical search for adequacy in the world. The moments of adequacy between an expression and a world that film offers us

exist only through the natural expressivity of the ordinary human body. This is what Emerson demanded: "What would we really know the meaning of?[…] the form and the gait of the body." These meanings and moods are manifested – to anticipate here the ethnographic analyses of Goffman – through the ordinary human conversational gesture.

It is this echo of Emerson's demand that one hears in Wittgenstein (whose interest in cinematographic experience is known). It returns to Cavell to disclose the transatlantic connection hidden between ordinary life, language, and natural expressivity. Conversation in film is bodily expression: Cavell notes that the dialogues of a film cannot be reproduced, and do not give anything when they are spoken (except if one speaks about it with somebody who saw the film, returning to a shared experience of the vision of the dialogue). The conversation is intended to be viewed. The success of a dialogue on screen, these moments of conversational felicity that the grand Hollywood films offer, exist only in their temporal and fleeting projection: "they have to be taken from the page and put back […] onto the screen" (Cavell 1981: 11). In this way, the films respond to the failures of experience (infelicities, misfires, in the Austinian register), through the successes/felicities of conversation, which are rare and memorable, as Goffman notes in *Frame Analysis*.

These memorable moments are fragments, privileged fragments of experience, which will constitute the subjective grammar of it, the expression of the importance.

> [These] films […] bear in their experience as memorable public events, segments of the experiences, the memories, of a common life. So that the difficulty of assessing them is the same as the difficulty of assessing everyday experience, the difficulty of expressing oneself satisfactorily. (Cavell 1981: 41)

Linguistic phenomenology as a pragmatic approach of the ordinary

In the ordinary of ordinary language one can see a pluralistic reformulation of the question of the description of ordinary experience: ordinary language philosophy, which, following Wittgenstein, confronts the failures of practiced language in its description. The next stop along the ordinary's transatlantic circuit is thus Great Britain. The exploration of uses is an inventory of our forms of life: for Austin, we examine "what we would say when." (Austin 1962: 182) It is a matter of saying not only what *we* say, (a theme of the common, of agreement, of consent within language; cf. Wittgenstein 1953) but also "which words to employ in which situations,"(*id*.) what is fitting to the circumstances or allows one to act on them. Austin makes clear: "we are not looking merely at words, but also at the realities we use the words to talk about. We are using our sharpened awareness of words to sharpen our perception, though not as the final arbiter of, the phenomena" (1962: 182). The language of description is then a tool for focusing, associated with agreement and with the perception of the important detail.

To speak about ordinary language is to speak about the world, but this does not happen through a miraculous connection of language-thought to reality: It happens on condition of precisely describing the uses of language and their differences. To say is to perceive. "For defining an elephant (supposing we ever do this) is a compendious description of an operation involving both word and animal (do we focus the image or the battleship?)" (ibid**.** 124) Austin, by advocating the description of uses, seeks this relation of words and the world (words/world again).

The theme of the ordinary introduces skepticism into practice: certainty, or trust in what we do (play, argue, value, promise), models itself on the trust that we have in our shared

uses of language and our capacity for using it well. The enigma of speaking the same language – the uncanniness of the use of ordinary language – is the possibility for me of speaking in the name of others, and vice versa. It is not enough to invoke commonness; it remains to be known what authorizes me to speak, what is the real strength of the agreement.

> It is what human beings say that is true and false; and they agree in the language they use.
> That is not agreement in opinions but in form of life. (Wittgenstein PI §241)

It is crucial for Cavell that Wittgenstein says that we agree in and not on language, language as spoken. That means we are not actors of the agreement, that language precedes this agreement as much as it is produced by the latter, and that this same circularity makes the assertion of a primacy of agreement or of human coordination (joint attention or common absorption) impossible:

> We learn and teach words in certain contexts, and then we are expected, and expect others, to be able to project them into further contexts. Nothing insures that this projection will take place (in particular, not the grasping of universals nor the grasping of books of rules) […]. It is a vision as simple as it is difficult, and as difficult as it is (and because it is) terrifying."(Cavell 1969: 52)

To agree in language means that language produces our agreement as much as it is the product of an agreement; that it is natural for us, and that the idea of convention is to mimic and mask this need. "Underlying the tyranny of convention is the tyranny of nature," according to Cavell:

> Here the array of "conventions" are not patterns of life which differentiate human beings from one another, but those exigencies of conduct and feeling which all humans share. Wittgenstein's discovery, or rediscovery, is of the depth of convention in human life; a discovery which insists not only on the conventionality of human society but, we could say, on the conventionality of human nature itself. (Cavell 1979: 110-11)

This natural link between language agreement and conventions is fundamental in Austin, and defines the conditions of felicity for our use of language. "Performatives, if adequate to reality, are felicitous, if not, then, in specific ways, infelicitous" (Cavell 1984: 81). This attention, centered on failure as much, and even more, than on success, is characteristic of Austin, who will allow the theme of the ordinary to return to America, this time in sociological description. Linguistic phenomenology returns in a sociological form with Goffman, whose work echoes Cavell's in its discovery of the ordinary. One of the goals of ordinary language philosophy is to determine the various ways for an utterance to be infelicitous, inadequate to reality, to fail. One of the goals of Goffman's sociology will be to determine the ways for our actions, our behavior, to be infelicitous. Austin, like Goffman, wants to give the conditions of felicitous language as ordinary practice, to highlight the vulnerability of our uses, and to provide some tools for adequate repairs (excuses, arrangements: see Laugier 2008).

The question is no longer exactly of agreement in language. Austin moves the difficulty, so often invoked in philosophy, of "arriving at an agreement" on an opinion or a theory, to another, to agreeing on a starting point, on a given, or, more precisely, a ground agreement on "what we would say when". This agreement, adds Austin, is an "agreement on the

manner of determining a certain given", "on a certain way, one, to describe and to know the facts". The agreement must be about the methods of the description of what happens.

> Here at last we should be able to unfreeze, to loosen up and get going on agreeing about discoveries, however small, and on agreeing about how to reach agreement. Austin 1962: 183)

Agreement and discovery are possible because 1) ordinary language cannot claim to be the last word; "we should simply remember that it is the first word" (ibid. 2) ordinary language is a collection of differences, and "contains all the distinctions that humans have judged useful to make", more subtle and solid than "those which we could, you or me, find, settled in an armchair on a beautiful afternoon – the more appreciated methodological alternative" (ibid). It is this capacity to mark and inventory differences that makes language an adequate instrument of perception: because reality is made up of these details and differences (which show up in the account we give them).

From this perspective, one can better understand the enigmatic passage in "A Plea for Excuses" where Austin excuses himself from speaking about linguistic phenomenology in order to assert the fact that the conscience refined by words is the refinement and education of our perception.

> When we examine what we should say when, we are looking again not merely at words (or meanings' whatever they may be) but also at the realities we use the words to talk about: we are using a sharpened awareness of words to sharpen our perception of, though not as the final arbiter of, the phenomena. For this reason I think it might be better to use, for this way of doing philosophy, some less misleading name than those given above–for instance, "linguistic phenomenology". (Austin 1962, 182)

It is in this theme of differences and resemblances (a common theme with Wittgenstein) that ordinary, natural realism is constituted; 'natural,' to borrow an expression Hilary Putnam (2001) used regarding Austin, James, and Wittgenstein. The distinctions that establish ordinary language philosophy, notes Cavell, are natural, drawn from observation, not manufactured like those of philosophers and theorists of language:

> One of Austin's most furious perceptions is of the slovenliness, the grotesque crudity and fatuousness, of the usual distinctions philosophers have traditionally thrown up. Consequently, one form his investigations take is that of repudiating the distinctions lying around philosophy – dispossessing them, as it were, by showing better ones. And better not merely because finer, but because more solid, having, so to speak, a greater natural weight; appearing normal, even inevitable, when the others are luridly arbitrary; useful where the others seem twisted; real where the others are academic. (Cavell 1969: 103)

The inventory of differences creates the link between language and reality. It is in this sense that philosophy is fieldwork/groundwork. One then understands Austin's fundamental intuition, which Goffman will develop in a more complete way, that language itself is something to perceive, framed, like contextualized practice, and it is as practice that it will fit or not: "fit the facts more or less loosely" (Austin 1961: 108). So for him, "fit" indicates a concept that is neither 'correspondence,' nor 'correction', but rather "fit" as the appropriate character, the proper statement in the circumstance. In his later philosophy, Wittgenstein also describes this indissociably social and perceptive moment when agreement in language – human coordination – is a matter of keen observation and

adjustment to the action, yet also "found", "met" as if the same contingency of "falling into place just so" defined agreement in language: *das treffende Wort* (Wittgenstein, PI II, XI)

In this agreement, in [what is] "achieved through mapping the fields of consciousness lit by the occasions of a word" (Cavell, 1969: 100), Austin registers the possibility of finding an ordinary adequacy to the world. This possibility is founded on the reality of language as the social activity of maintaining the world: conversation/conservation. Ordinary language is a tool**;** it represents experience and inherited perspicacity – a tool to mark differentiations. Consider, for example, the classification of actions in "Excuses" or the distinction at work in "Three Ways of Spilling Ink," between spilling intentionally, deliberately, purposely – the minute detail of human action in its capacity for disaster, casualty.

Goffman, returning explicitly to Austin, articulates the accuracy of the perception of "what happens," the access to reality (returning to William James's chapter on the principles of psychology entitled "The Perception of Reality" [1890]), and the felicity of speech. In Felicity's Condition, Goffman integrates the conditions of Austinian felicity with the condition of the interaction's felicity, adding his characteristic discovery to the Austinian given. There is a definition of felicity common to Austin and Goffman: normality, and maintenance of the expressive order. The order present within the ordinary (interaction order), is defined by the threat of embarrassment or breakdown. The felicity is minimal (appearance of sanity) and maximal. On the one hand, it is easy to fail: the possibility of conversational failure sums up the vulnerability of human action, of the ordinary form of life. On the other hand, felicity sums up our chance to have a world – this new America, always unapproachable. Here, Goffman is the heir at the same time to the transcendentalist quest, the pragmatist investigation, and linguistic phenomenology. Moments of social disorganization – like moments of rupture in interaction, or more radically, like the irruption of mentally disturbed behavior in a family – are moments of loss: a loss of the experience itself. We saw that with his insistence on failure, Austin highlights the vulnerability of ordinary human action, defined on the model of the performative utterance, as what can turn out badly. Thus the pragmatic theme (the title "How to do things with words" was chosen by Austin for his William James Lectures in ironic homage to the pragmatist maxim) is inversed; action is articulated through speech, defined and regulated by failure, "going wrong". Goffman defines the human character of action by taking a chance. Action means (analytically) that there is damage incurred to oneself and to others and that one takes risks (a threat to one's face or of others) because of the circumstances of the action.

This is what the whole Austinian theory of excuses – which follows the description of the philosophy of language as fieldwork – shows. Excuses – what we say when it appears we have acted or done badly (awkwardly, inadequately, etc.) – excuses let us know what an action is, they let us begin to classify and differentiate what we gather under the general term 'action'. Excuses are essential to human action – they do not in some way come "afterwards". The variety of excuses shows the impossibility of defining agency otherwise than in the detail and diversity of our modes of description and clarification, in the styles of accomplishment (or non-accomplishment) of action, and in the manner or look that one wants to give it.

It is a matter of seeing the whole human form of life as vulnerable, defined by a constellation of possible failures, of ways that we have of compensating, of strategies that we have for forgiving or forgetting, for leveling things, and for swallowing our difficult condition as creatures of failure. Goffman, in "Cooling the mark out" examines cases where

it is necessary to support someone in the suffering of a radical social failure [Goffmanian interaction analysis assigns a place to ordinary disorders, agitations, embarrassments, shame, uneasiness in trespassing encounters, intrusions, offences, and violations at the surface of "normal appearances," all of which make us suffer the fragility of the ordinary conceived as intimately connected to *order*. Concern with excuses and reparation due to others is indeed the transatlantic link from Austin to Goffman, who brings Oxford back to America and to Chicago – all the way to Goffman's last great work, *Frame Analysis : Essay on the Organization of Experience*. The ordinary is redefined once again on American ground, and is redefined as reality itself, seen as itself vulnerable – to others, and to our perceptions. Ordinary language philosophy and, specifically, the discovery of speech acts are being linked to this problematic of the failure, transgression, and vulnerability of the social person. Cavell couples this vulnerability to the reality of this expressive body.

By introducing Oxford ordinary language philosophy to it, *Frame Analysis* achieves the Emersonian and pragmatist project of categorization of the ordinary: "to take ordinary activity seriously as a 'paramount part of reality'". Goffman returns to Dewey as well as to William James, using widely *The Perception of Reality*.

But here Henry James may be even closer to this conception of the ordinary that stems from Emerson. For James experience – our capacity to feel life in general and in detail – is constituted by our attention. He follows Emerson (and will somehow be followed by Dewey) in his idea that the most difficult is not (as the European epistemology taught us) to learn (or derive knowledge) from experience, but to HAVE an experience. Our problem, as Cavell beautifully says, is that we are *inexperienced*.

> Experience is never limited and it is never complete; it is an immense sensibility, a kind of huge spider-web, of the finest silken threads, suspended in the chamber of consciousness and catching every air-borne particle in its tissue. [...]
> The power to guess the unseen from the seen, to trace the implication of things, to judge the whole piece by the pattern, the condition of feeling life, in general, so completely that you are well on your way to knowing any particular corner of it–this cluster of gifts may almost be said to constitute experience. Therefore, if I should certainly say to a novice, "Write from experience, and experience only," I should feel that this was a rather tantalising monition if I were not careful immediately to add, "Try to be one of the people on whom nothing is lost!" I am far from intending by this to minimise the importance of exactness – of truth of detail. (James, *The Art of Fiction*)

What is referred to here is a competence that is not only a matter of knowledge or of reasoning, but of adequate and particular expression. Here again, it is a question of the expression of experience: when and how to trust in one's experience. The attention that James' writing invites and sustains does not give us certainties; rather it makes uncertainty emerge: it makes experience itself an adventure in the strict sense (or, to speak after the manner of Emerson, a *true romance*). There is adventure, according to James, in every situation that mixes uncertainty and "the taste of life". Experience itself, if one trusts it, becomes an adventure itself. This is maybe an unseen, but important and still living connection between transcendentalism and pragmatism.

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