
As a student of Romanticism, I expected to be in my comfort zone with *Secular Mysteries*; however the density of ideas and my lack of knowledge about the Stanley Cavell *oeuvre* made for hard going. Yet despite the gaps in my philosophical education, I enjoyed the ideas and arguments in Duffy’s text. He is an interesting and widely-read scholar, and his original criticism of Shelley and Wordsworth offer new perspectives on their well-known works.

Duffy’s notion of Cavell’s ‘redemptive reading’ is as inspiring as it is interesting. Although the ‘blurb’ for the text concentrates on the connections Duffy makes between Cavell’s philosophical works and Romanticism, Cavell’s project is as much linguistic as it is Romantic; his aim being to choose words that ‘would let rise the intuitive leaven of what he has at heart to say, and so ... deliver into the hands of his readers the promise of a new birth of ... glorious liberty, not here effected once and for all but now confidently to be found “in every word, with every breath”’ (33). Redemption is to be found in language, which goes some way to explaining why ‘America’s most distinguished “ordinary-language” philosopher is shown to be tied to the neo-Romantic claim that far from being merely an illustrator of the truths discovered by philosophy, poetry is its equal partner in the instituting of knowledge.’

Romanticism, and in particular Romantic poetry, is seen as a transgressive outbreak of language for Cavell, signalling his own interest in a ‘silent melancholy about everyday living that stems from the need for ‘a romanticism in quest of the (of my) (human) voice’ (35). This arises in part from his central philosophical hope that, through accepting that his words are no longer his, but are abandoned after he has uttered or written them, he may then recognise his voice and in that recognition redeem the words as his own (56).

Cavell intuits Romantic poetry to be both an account of losses and a textual recovery, and Romanticism as a project bent to the effort of seeking secular mysteries from ordinary, everyday experience; a project intent also on the call for words and thought to represent an endlessly becoming world’ (109). Duffy explains how ‘Wordsworth’s vision of a majestic intellect [the “gloomy breathing-place” next to Snowdon in 1850 *Prelude*] does indeed represent the world as so calling for words ... signaled by the fact that although this primordial breach is introduced visually as a “blue chasm”, it is thereafter exclusively represented as an auditory phenomenon ... “roaring with one voice”’ (109).

Duffy states that the ‘work of Cavell and the texts of the English Romantics call out and answer to each other in ways that sound out the world-historical depths of the questions and purposes animating their poetry and his philosophy’, because all wrestle with both the ‘aspiration to an idea of the human ... [and] the mysteries of the human condition’ (202, 224). Overall, the careful reader will be rewarded by Duffy’s original readings of Shelley and Wordsworth, and students of linguistics and philosophy will

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1 Quoted from press release for *Secular Mysteries*. 


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appreciate this densely packed study of Cavell, and no doubt see the promise in Cavell’s claim that he does not make the world, and the things into which it endlessly gathers and differentiates itself. Neither do ‘I’ he continues, ‘systematize the language in which the thing differs from all other things in the world. I testify to both, acknowledge my need of both’ (83).

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