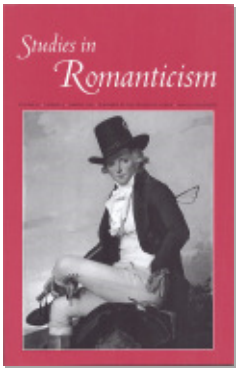
# *Secular Mysteries: Stanley Cavell and English Romanticism* by Edward T. Duffy (review)




Johanna Winant

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helped to plan. Ross was the leader of one of these voyages, but turned back when he thought he saw a range of mountains blocking the passage. Barrow was convinced that Ross invented the mountains as an excuse for his own cowardice, and so began a twenty-year feud between the two men. This material will be unfamiliar to most literary scholars of Romanticism, and it reminds us that the periodicals contained much other material besides their reviews of poetry and novels. In his articles, Barrow is caught between his contempt for John Ross and his almost fanatical conviction that the North-West Passage exists and that a British ship will discover it. But Wheatley shows how Barrow's discourse also constructs and interrogates an "Arctic sublime." "John Barrow does not seek transcendence whether as thematic preoccupation or rhetorical effect," she concludes, "but it finds him" (173).

Kim Wheatley begins her chapter on the *Watt Tyler* controversy with the words "The story has often been told, though usually as background rather than foreground" (21). *Romantic Feuds* joins several recent studies that restore periodical writing to the foreground and argue for its constitutive role in the emergence of Romanticism as an intellectual formation, as well as its historical importance in the print culture of the period. Carefully researched from many sources, and well informed about existing criticism, it deserves to be read not only by scholars specializing in periodicals, but by Romanticists more widely.

Tom Mole
University of Edinburgh, UK

Edward T. Duffy. *Secular Mysteries: Stanley Cavell and English Romanticism.* London: Bloomsbury, 2013. Pp. 304. $120.

In *Secular Mysteries: Stanley Cavell and English Romanticism*, Edward T. Duffy connects three romantic writers, each of whom, he writes, argues for the importance of attention to ordinary words and common experience. All three, according to Duffy, suggest that an account of the good life requires this attention because it allows intimacy with the world. Two of these romantics are William Wordsworth and Percy Bysshe Shelley, but the one discussed first is the contemporary philosopher of language Stanley Cavell, whom Duffy reframes relative to the English romantic tradition.

Over the past fifty years, Cavell has written about Shakespeare's tragedies, golden-age Hollywood comedies, fiction by Henry James, improvisational jazz, Continental philosophy by Friedrich Nietzsche, Martin Heidegger, and Jacques Derrida, and, perhaps most famously, the essays of

Henry David Thoreau and Ralph Waldo Emerson. Although Cavell focuses on the specifically American, he touches on British Romanticism, including important readings of Samuel Taylor Coleridge's *Rime of the Ancient Mariner* and William Wordsworth's *Immortality Ode* in 1994's *In Quest of the Ordinary*, and Duffy's book grows out of this brief contact. Duffy argues that Cavell's work is transatlantically romantic, and in *Secular Mysteries*, he shows how it shares concerns, goals, and techniques with the poetry of Wordsworth and Shelley. Once Duffy draws this connection, it seems strange that Cavell, one of the most important thinkers writing out of ordinary language philosophy, has not written more about the poets who sought to distinguish their project as the "language really spoken by men." Duffy's book is an important expedition connecting these figurative and literal continents. (William Desmond's essay, "A Second *Primavera*: Cavell, German Philosophy, and Romanticism," in *Stanley Cavell*, a 2003 collection of essays edited by Richard Eldridge, is another. Surprisingly, Duffy does not mention it.) Duffy's book divides into three sections: the first several chapters argue for Cavell's relevance to British Romanticism, the next two chapters discuss Wordsworth, and the final three chapters are on Shelley.

Only the first third of *Secular Mysteries* focuses on Cavell, but the conceptual framing for the book as a whole comes from his philosophy. Cavell began his career as a student and critic of J. L. Austin and Ludwig Wittgenstein, and the basis of much of his thought is the argument that attention to our ordinary language contains the remedy for the trenchant philosophical problem of skepticism. Analytic philosophers from David Hume to G. E. Moore have argued that we cannot know the mind of another; Cavell says that this is true, but irrelevant. If not being able to "know" the pain of another, for example, is taken as the model for how to talk about the world, it leads to what he calls the "scary conclusion" of skepticism (*Must We Mean What We Say?* 246). But, Cavell writes, when we recognize that "to know what another is feeling" lacks sense, just as "I know that I am in pain" lacks sense, then we can see that the proper relation is not knowledge but what Cavell calls "acknowledgement" (*Must We Mean What We Say?* 255). Acknowledging another's pain and the claim it makes upon one, responding to that claim, is the only way of showing that one understands what it means for anyone to be in pain. To avoid acknowledgement leads to tragedy (hence Cavell's work on Shakespeare) and to embrace acknowledgement, to receive the world, is to gain an intimacy with it. Cavell reads Emerson and Thoreau as the exemplary philosophers of this receptive intimacy, of the promise of a world redeemed not by refuting skepticism but by offering another model: not by trying to "grasp objects" or "penetrate phenomena" but attending to words and "leading

them back" to their everyday usage from which they have been exiled (he picks up the image of words in exile from Wittgenstein [*This New Yet Unapproachable America* 88, *Philosophy the Day After Tomorrow* 199]). This sort of "aversive" thinking, Cavell argues, is the basis of his concept of perfectionism, our ability to become better people who live in the world more fully and morally.

Cavell recasts Emerson and Thoreau as *avant-le-lettre* kin to ordinary-language philosophers responding to skepticism, but when Duffy recasts Cavell as an *après-le-lettre* British romantic, he deemphasizes skepticism and ordinary language philosophy and instead focuses on later Cavell, the Cavell who deploys the terms of receptivity and intimacy, aversive thinking, and perfectionism. Duffy writes, paraphrasing Cavell, "Our primary relation to the world is not in the knowing of it but in a more fundamental receiving of it" (202). The drawbacks of focusing on the later Cavell without a great deal of context from his earlier work are apparent: if a reader is not already familiar with Cavell, he or she will have a hard time understanding Cavell's arguments from Duffy's book. Cavell is extensively quoted in *Secular Mysteries* but rarely summarized, and the result is that he can appear aphoristic or even mystical. Alternatively, one could say Cavell's work is presented as Continental rather than as analytical philosophy, or as literary rather than logical in structure. That is, Duffy announces his more conventional plan to read poetry as philosophical, but he also reads philosophical texts as literary ones. The reward, then, of Duffy's emphasis on Cavellian terms but relative brevity on retracing specific arguments is an expansive thematic reading of Cavell, connecting various brief quotations from various texts about various subjects. To illustrate Cavell's "master theme of the human voice" (47), Duffy follows the imagery of breath from Cavell on *Othello*, to Cavell on Emerson and on Thoreau, to Cavell's own memoir, and then connects "the words we broadcast in the air" to the writings of Derrida, Austin, Heidegger, Wittgenstein, and, ultimately, Wordsworth (55). Breath ties in with both the ability to receive the world intimately and the possibility and power of speaking with one's own voice; both are required for the redemption of language and thus for one's establishment of a moral, good life. This tracking of what turns out to be an illuminating Cavellian trope is fascinating, but in its reliance on association, the argument at times meanders.

When Duffy reaches his chapters on Wordsworth, his wide-angled argument comes into sharper focus and his previous work on themes like breath starts paying off. For example, Duffy reads the boat-stealing episode of *The Prelude* as "More than simply an account of 'an impressionable boy projecting the 'inner' reality of his guilt onto the 'outward' thing of the cliff'" (70). Rather, "This opening picture in the growth of the poet's mind por-

trays the 'outer' as necessarily present at the creation of an 'inner'" (71). As a result of stealing and then returning the boat during a night when "outward things seem endowed with respiring life" (69), the boy who becomes the poet learns Wordsworth's characteristic "wise passiveness," his intimacy with the world, his way of receiving it, developing in that process an "optimally human way of being in the world" (81).

The final third of *Secular Mysteries* moves to the longer poems of Shelley, who, unlike Wordsworth, does not exemplify the achievement of Cavellian "wise passiveness" of receptivity but rather yearns for it: he "is everywhere to be found struggling toward a trusting response in such constructions of our language and form of life as show themselves to have been impressionably open to what's in the wind" (167). By dramatizing "the convergence of need and desire [that] is definitive of perfectionist writing" (130), Shelley is "a perfectionist writer who thinks in verse" (135). So rather than shunning the real world, Duffy argues, "Shelley does indeed crave reality" (169). Spending most of his time on *Epipyschidion* and *Adonais*, Duffy writes about the latter that it "is about nothing so much as the hope and possibility of its author's staying the course of being responsively present to his own life and calling" (181). This section, like that on Wordsworth, is sharpest when Cavell and Shelley are brought right against each other, such as when Duffy connects Cavell's "late arriving epiphany" that we lose intimacy with the world when we "imagine that our words are not up to the tasks they assign themselves" with Shelley's "radical mistrust of our words [that] persistently cuts through the ineluctably verbal texture of his poetry" (178).

Duffy repeatedly describes Cavell's work as "calling for romanticism" (118), and describes romanticism as answering that call (202). This book imagines that conversation and hears echoes reverberating into more echoes. The analyses in *Secular Mysteries* are multiple and layered, and the arguments shift in surprising directions rather than move steadily forward. Another way of saying this is to say that this book seeks to emulate some of Cavell's later work by rearranging one's expectations of how to read both the words on the page and the world beyond it. Being convinced by Duffy's argument would thus mean calling this book "romantic" and "perfectionist." Although readers will probably need some previous experience with Cavell, Wordsworth, and Shelley, still, one hopes this book will be so received.

Johanna Winant
College of the Holy Cross