Grammatical self, linguistic community and education of grownups: Cavell reads Emerson

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Abstract: The article discusses Stanley Cavell’s interpretation of Ralph Waldo Emerson with a focus on the concepts of individuality, self-acknowledgment, and Bildung as one’s education through reading, called “the education of grownups”. Beginning with Emerson’s essay “Self-Reliance”, his critique of Descartes’ cogito is examined and the Emersonian alternative vision of acquiring individual existence is reconstructed. In this depiction, a solipsistic Cartesian account of man is replaced with a vision of the grammatical self, which is at the same time social, linguistic, and, as a result, literary. Creating the self proceeds through a critical discussion with the extant tradition and, besides self-acknowledgment, aims at contributing to the founding of a particular form of life (within a nation, a community). The two goals of creating the self—the individual and the social one—constitute for Emerson the core of the Bildung construed as the forming of a particular person. In this context, the Emersonian phrase of “new yet unapproachable America” is placed against the educational background, in which neither the individual self nor the communal we are ever completely grasped. The distinctive feature of such Bildung is that it is not confined to the process of one’s growing up, but extends to the life of adults and, as a result, finds its realisation within “the education of grownups”. Accordingly, the process of education assumes that one individual needs another as a teacher—who paradigmatically speaks to her via a literary text—to constantly be open to some
unknown, possible direction of her development. For Cavell, mutual education, i.e. one’s being a teacher or/and a learner, is a precondition of democratic society.

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1. Introduction
Ralph Waldo Emerson occupies a definitely prominent place both in American and world literature (see Porte & Morris, 1994). Apart from his undisputable significance as a writer in literary criticism and the history of literature, his writings and addresses have become a subject of philosophical reflection (e.g., Misak, 2008; Van Leer, 1986). The below discussion aims at reconstructing and analysing one of the philosophical interpretations of this writer, namely, the reading advanced by Stanley Cavell. The distinctive point of Cavell's interpretation is that he sees Emerson’s “Self-Reliance” as providing an essential critique of Descartes, specifically the cogito argument, and as proposing instead a linguistic view on the forming of the self. Accordingly, the paper starts with a reconstruction of Emerson's polemic with Descartes as Cavell reads it. Based on Emerson's putting much stress on the idea of self-acknowledgment of one's individuality and the crucial role of linguistic, literary and thus social spheres in one's self-creation, the second section of the paper places the idea of individuality in the context of Bildung, or education. Analogically to the construction of the I, the idea of making the we, the communal, or founding a nation, through Bildung is set out and the Emersonian idea of “new yet unapproachable America” as an educational concept is put forward. Following this idea, the third section develops Cavell's view on philosophy as “the education of grownups” along with Emerson's conception of reading. Against this background, the mutual education in which one person, or a text, plays the role of a teacher and another is a learner (a reader) is presented as a process that fosters both one's individual self-reliant growth and the community's reflective development. The mere idea of democracy—for Cavell and Emerson—draws on such an educational praxis.

2. Language and self-creation: Emerson contending with Descartes
According to Cavell, Emerson's renowned essay “Self-Reliance” is, to a large extent, a veiled polemic with Descartes, concerning the cogito argument and the institution of the individual (Cavell, 2005: 27). And despite the former's laying particular stress on human individuality, an indispensable and formative element of the social is evidently at stake in the construction of the self.

In the middle of the essay, Emerson wrote a sentence that can be regarded as the essence of the whole text: “Man is timid and apologetic; he is no longer upright; he dares not to say ‘I think’, ‘I am’, but quotes some saint or sage” (Emerson, 2005). The first part of the quotation reprises the topic frequently brought up in his earlier writings and addresses (e.g., “The American Scholar”, “Divinity School Address”), where he set out a critique of the “soul-destroying slavery to habit” in religion and reproved the mediocre imitator or idoliser of Christ who “bereaves himself of his own beauty, to come short of another man’s” (Emerson, 1838); and where he denounced traditional scholars—“the restorers of readings, the emendators, the bibliomaniacs of all degrees” (Emerson, 1837)—for their slavishness. Yet, the second part of the above quote from “Self-Reliance” seems to place Emerson’s view in opposition to Descartes’ Meditations on First Philosophy, where—in the second meditation—he formulated his famed phrase “cogito ergo sum”: “I think, therefore I am” (Descartes, 2008).
Cavell finds this to be the proper interpretative key to Emerson's account of man and draws on a juxtaposition between the two authors. He notes that in the second meditation Descartes also gives another rendering of cogito as following: “I am, I exist, is necessarily true every time that I pronounce it or conceive it in mind”. In view of this, Emerson's emphasis on the actual act of saying ‘I’, ‘I think’, “I am”, “I exist” is basically truthful to Descartes's intentions. Thus, in a paraphrase, Emerson's understanding of the cogito would be: “I say ‘I am, I exist’, therefore I am” (Cavell & idem, 1988). In this context, a further question arises: “what happens if I do not say ‘I am, I exist’ or conceive it in my mind” (Cavell & idem, 1988)? Do I not exist?

From a stricter analytical perspective, the question seems not to make sense, by virtue of the fact that my refraining from actual saying, or thinking, the aforementioned phrase does not at all preclude my own existence. Yet, Descartes himself seems to allow such a reading in a later passage, when he strengthens the cogito argument by the claim that “man is nothing but a thinking thing”, and by saying that: “if I totally ceased thinking, […] I would at the same time completely cease to be” (Descartes, 2008). In the same vein, as Cavell understands it, Emerson implies: “I am a being who to exist, must say I exist, or must acknowledge my existence—claim it, state it, enact it” (Cavell & idem, 1988). Hence, in defiance of Descartes, who did focus on man's metaphysical identity (“I am essentially a thing that thinks”), Emerson—having posed the same question about the unique character of the human as Descartes did—is preoccupied with the grammatical, or linguistic, answer to this question (Cavell & idem, 1988).

What are the consequences of the shift from metaphysics to grammar? The first and general one is the contention that man lives with scepticism—which Descartes himself believed to have overcome. For Descartes, one's existence needs to be proved: my own being appears as a conclusion in the inference “I think, therefore I am”, and thus requires the premise “I think”, which will form a modus ponens. However, according to Descartes, the lack of this premise—or the lack of my actual thinking—does not actually endanger my existence because God, whose idea is inborn in my mind, did create me as “a thing that thinks”. Thinking is a metaphysical attribute, or property, by virtue of which I cannot stop being “a thinking thing”. Given my existence being once proved, it lasts. In the context of Meditations, it is thought to allow us to avoid scepticism and acquire certainty about human existence. The novum introduced by Emerson relies on his opening a different possibility: man does not have to exist—albeit not in the metaphysical sense, but in the sense developed later by existentialism (Goodman, 1990, p. 39; Arcilla, 2012, p. 163)—and, with greater reason, does not have to think or say “I think, I am, I exist”. Such a possibility does away not only with the metaphysical account of man created by God as a “thinking thing”, but also with the crucial Cartesian premise (“I think”) from which the conclusion about one's being is supposed to follow. In this way, a threat of scepticism towards my own existence is again imminent. Accordingly, my own being has to be endorsed: to get rid of the scepticism, and thus to exist, I ‘must say ‘I exist’ or must acknowledge my existence—claim it” (Cavell & idem, 1988).

The second consequence is that Emerson's shift from metaphysics to grammar in approaching the cogito “does not prejudge what the I or self or mind or soul may turn out to be, but only specifies a condition that whatever it is must meet” (Cavell & idem, 1988). Who I am is decided by me through the act of acknowledgement or enactment, instead of being discovered, like in Descartes' Meditations, as a metaphysical thesis. Such a stance, in turn, has crucial pedagogical implications as to one's responsibility for his or her self-creation, and for shaping his or her own approach to life, including the world and the others.

The third thing is that the proof of my existence takes effect only in the moment of its giving. Although we do not enact our existence at all times, we still always have the possibility of re-enacting as well as reshaping it. Given the fact that my existence is never completed, its being transient, I am principally open to my future acts of self-authentication. For Descartes, such an idea of transient self—the self that not only is, but also becomes—was foreclosed, on the
metaphysical level, in the third meditation, where the philosopher concluded that God defines who I am once for all.

The fourth consequence is related to the previous one and concerns the issue of authoring, which is another pedagogical aspect on the part of Emerson. For Descartes, the self, or I, requires an authorship “from the outside”, that is, needs a creator which my own non-autarchical existence depends on. Clearly, it is solely God that is the creator. In Emerson, however, notwithstanding the religious idea of God, the metaphorical idea of man’s self-authorising—instead of God’s authorship—comes to the fore. As Cavell reads Emerson: “there is a sense of being the author of oneself [...] the author of himself is a continuing task, not property, a task in which the goal, or the product of the process, is not a state of being but a moment of change, say of becoming—a transience of being, a being of transience” (1988). In this vein, Emerson himself writes that “This one fact the world hates; that the soul becomes” (2005). The theme of constant change, transgressing the old ways of life and energising the spirit of this change also appears in “Circles”, where he claims that our reality manifests itself most clearly in the moments of transition understood as forming ourselves anew. “No truth so sublime but it may be trivial tomorrow in the light of new thoughts. People wish to be settled: only as far as they are unsettled, is there any hope for them” (Emerson, 1841).

The above consequences lead Emerson to the overall conclusion that man does not exist. Man’s uncreatedness, failure at self-creation, and incapacity to acknowledge his or her existence constitutes the world of “conformity”: of postures of perpetual penance or self-mortification, extenuation. It is in this context that the author reaches the conviction: “Man is timid and apologetic; he is no longer upright; he dares not to say ‘I think’, ‘I am’, but quotes some saint or sage. He is ashamed before the blade of grass or the blowing rose […] they are for what they are; they exist with God today” (2005).

Emerson himself was a proponent of nonconformism, that is, of a posture—which he called “a good posture” (2005)—acquired through self-reliance, through self-authoring: enacting and acknowledging one’s own being. From today’s perspective, his critique of conformism might appear as permeated with excessive didacticism. However, for Cavell, nonconformism means one’s finding and accepting their unique way in the world. In this sense, as he says, Hamlet’s famous question “To be or not to be” may be well understood as the question of accepting his being, not as of his choosing to live or to die (1988). Such acceptance entails, in the Emersonian terms “daring to say”, not “to quote”.

The decisive twist in Cavell’s reading of Emerson is to point to an apparent paradox: when Emerson repines that man “dares not to say ‘I think’, ‘I am’, but quotes some saint or sage”, he himself resorts to quoting, namely he does quote Descartes (1988). In turn, what Cavell does in his essay appears to be quoting a quotation of a quotation. How then should it be understood? Cavell tags this paradox “Emerson’s gag”, which relies on implying or implicitly confessing that “saying is quoting” (1988). Although it might suggest, on the surface, that our saying and quoting is indecipherable—that it is not possible to distinguish one from the other—such a conclusion would not be truthful. For, according to Cavell, Emerson’s gag condenses a number of important ideas. First of all, it implies that “Language is an inheritance. Words are before I am; they are common” (Cavell & idem, 1988). In a sense, when speaking, man always quotes, since he or she always uses words and meanings that are preestablished. The fact that one speaks in his or her own voice, not quotes, and that he or she thinks, not imitates, is a matter of one’s self-reliance, which is actualised in the social and linguistic sphere, when articulating one’s thoughts and experience. One creates oneself when necessarily finding himself or herself confronted with the extant tradition, both the common (the oral) and the literary one.

It can also be said that quoting may assume several forms: firstly, a quoter can use someone else’s words by slavishly imitating them; secondly, he or she can use these words as his or her own,
not in the sense of plagiarism, but as a result of identifying himself or herself with a phrase bequeathed by tradition, like Bias of Priene's “omnia mea mecum porto”; thirdly, words can be quoted, as by Emerson, in order to critically discuss the thought behind the quotation while forming or expressing one's own beliefs. It seems that the legitimate form of quoting is one's doing it in the second and third sense of the aforementioned. In the Cavellian spirit, the fact that Emerson quotes Descartes in “Self-Reliance” can be also understood as an exemplification of the idea that in developing our own beliefs we need some other person, his or her text, to have a discussion with.

The final idea read by Cavell in Emerson is that acquiring self-reliance through language involves the sayers—or writer's—“readiness to subject your desire to words [...] to become intelligible, with no assurance that you will be taken up" (1988); yet, in the last resort, “the claim to existence requires returning words to language, as if making them common to us” (1988); in other words, it requires the private saying to become social. It can be rightly understood and claimed that one of the prominent effects of self-reliance is literature. And Emerson’s reflection on the mere idea of genius is a relevant piece of evidence for that: “To believe your own thought, to believe that what is true for your private heart is true for all men—that is genius” (Emerson, 2005). Doing literature is an owning of words—a coming to possession of them—and then returning them to life. This is why we as readers have the possibility to find our own voice in literature (in other’s speaking or writing) as well as we have the right to cite it by ourselves, as Emerson did with Descartes.

Therefore, in Cavell’s interpretation of Emerson, the Cartesian cogito has been denied or negated in “Self-Reliance” (Cavell & idem, 1988). It has been shown that the I, or self, has intrinsically a grammatical character, not a metaphysical one; that it is established in a linguistic, hence social, sphere within some “hermeneutic” tradition, not in a solipsistic manner; that it is transient, rather than given once for all; and that our existence thus needs self-creation, or self-authentication.

3. Self-acknowledgment, Bildung and “new yet unapproachable America”
The genius which Emerson speaks of as one’s coming to possession of words and then returning it to life in public is not, as the usual meaning of the word “genius” might suggest, an elitist concept, but rather an egalitarian or democratic one, since he believes that a unique capacity lies within each man or woman (Goodman, 1990, p. 36). When claiming that: “The power which resides in him is new in nature, and none but he knows what that is which he can do, nor does he know until he has tried” (Emerson, 2005), he speaks not about some individuals but about everyone. What can set this genius free in us is Bildung, or education and self-development (Lysaker, 2008, p. 1).

Against this background, the question about the conditions and objectives of self-acknowledgment arises. In reconstructing Emerson's ideas, the first thing to appear as both a condition and an objective of Bildung is freedom. On the one hand, as he admits in his later essay “Fate”, human freedom has many external restrictions and limitations stemming from nature (such as race, sex, temperament) and natural powers (such as climatic changes, earthquakes, etc.): “Nature is the tyrannous circumstance”, which seems to constitute fate: “organization tyrannizing ourselves” (Emerson, 1879). Besides, as he notes in “Self-Reliance”, the society to which we conform can make us “as it were clapped into jail” (Emerson, 2005), and likewise the traditions and institutions of the past can do this to us. On the other hand, he is firmly convinced of the “positive power” of man through which he or she can overcome a lot of such obstacles to freedom (Emerson, 1879). However, what is most important in his understanding of freedom is that it is not treated as a metaphysical property, but rather as a virtue of the character to be formed and built in the process of Bildung and self-creation. Like in the ethical theories of virtues, freedom in Emerson’s writings is not definable in advance: it might be both the freedom from—i.e., from tradition, church, past institutions, natural elements—and the freedom to—e.g., to one's own lifestyle, forms of expression, choice of one’s vocation, etc. The key to possess and cultivate freedom is one’s attitude of nonconformity. Only then can inherited tradition, religion, concepts, and texts inspire instead of enslaving; and only then are we able to say something, not only to
quote. In “The American Scholar” he underscores that if we acquire self-trust, then “all virtues are comprehended. Free should the scholar be—free even to the definition of freedom” (Emerson, 1938). Thus, human freedom—which indeed refers not only to scholars—has been closely tied to one’s self-trust and self-reliance. As Goodman summarises this issue, “we can control, to some extent at least, our freedom (...) we are free to become more free by becoming more self-reliant” (Goodman, 1990, p. 36).

The task of forming one’s self-trust is an educational enterprise, which is to be carried out both on an institutional level at schools and on an “informal” level of social relations and self-development. In his notes on education concerning mainly the aims of school teaching—post-humously collected by his son Edward Waldo Emerson in 1904—Emerson writes explicitly that:

“The great object of Education should be commensurate with the object of life. It should be a moral one; to teach self-trust; to inspire the youthful man with an interest in himself; with a curiosity touching his own nature; to acquaint with the resources of his mind, and to teach him that there is all his strength, and to inflame him with a piety towards the Grand Mind in which he lives. Thus would education conspired with the Devine Providence. A man is little thing whilst he works by and for himself, but, when he gives voice to the rules of love and justice, is godlike, this word is current in all countries; and all men, though his enemies, are made his friends and obey it as their own (Emerson, 1904).

In the quotation, the process of Bildung is conflated with the tenets of transcendentalism—Devine Providence embedded in Nature through which you get to know both yourself and perennial truths—but the quote also underlines that self-trust should lead not only to the individual constitution of self, but also to shaping the social world which we live in (see Gougeon, 2011).

This is a task that is complex and full of nuances. On the one hand, to acquire our individuality, we should distance ourselves from the social, extant traditions and inherited wisdom, so as not to be conformist to it; on the other hand, the interrelation between the individual and the social should lead to building our better social surroundings—in accordance with free and self-reliant others. In some cases—as in the times of Emerson and Thoreau, but also later—it would have to require of us acts of civil disobedience to make the world less oppressive and more just (see Read, 2011; Cavell).

The idea is metaphorically captured in the essay “Experience” in the idea of “new yet unapproachable America” (Emerson, 1844), which was taken up and followed by Cavell (in Cavell & idem, 2013). The phrase appears in Emerson’s essay only once: “I am ready to die out of nature, and be born again into this new yet unapproachable America I have found in the West” (Emerson, 1844), but for Cavell it grows into a metaphor of the idea of “finding as founding”. This thought, in turn, seems to have several layers. The first concerns one’s individual self-establishing (“The founder thou! These are thy race!”). When Emerson poses the question “Where do we find ourselves?”, at the beginning of the essay, his answer, however, suggests that our individuality is not actually something to be found, but something yet to be founded (i.e. backed or acknowledged): “In a series of which we do not know the extremes, and believe that it has none. We wake and find ourselves on a stair; there are stairs below us, which we seem to have ascended; there are stairs above us, many a one, which go upward and out of sight”. Accordingly, ones’ individuality is not a thing to be discovered, but then again to be created. The second layer comprises the thought that the founding, or the creation of oneself, does not lead to establishing any durable, quasi-metaphysical foundation of him or her. The idea is principally anti-foundationalist: “it is to be understood in terms of recurrent finding” (Saito, 2006, pp. 89–90), which means that the Bildung of oneself is an open process. The third level constitutes the assumption that the process of founding oneself can appear, and usually appears, at the state of loss or perplexity; it may be said that being founded precedes being a founder. In other words, a transgression from my old way of life to my new self progresses through opposition, a critical approach, or sheer loss of what constituted the old self.
However, as Saito noted, “this task of finding as founding is not only a matter of private therapeutic activity, but the perfectionist task of ‘founding a nation’, of acquiring ‘this new yet unapproachable America’” (Saito, 2006, p. 89). This crucial aspect brings us much closer to the social sphere. According to Cavell, the numerous allusions to Milton (Paradise Lost) and Columbus in “Experience” clearly suggest a parallel between Man’s expulsion from Eden (“Fall of Man”) and European newcomers’ landing on the American shore. The loss that Adam came to be aware of is the discovery of his existence on the unknown land into which he had been thrown; and the loss the first settlers in America must have felt is that they were going to build both their lives and their common life anew, leaving behind the Old World and their institutions (see Cavell & idem, 1992, p. 138). The freedom to create a new reality is felt as a burden and unhappiness, but also opens a space for “the Rise of Man”: for changing life for better.

Cavell also discusses the question of why a new land (in Emerson America) is “yet unapproachable”. His answers are mostly analogical to what has been said about the unattainability of individual self-acknowledgement. Accordingly, firstly, the landfall that we get may be unapproachable due to our inability “to experience it, hence to know or tell it” (Cavell & idem, 2013), which is parallel to the posture of conformity on an individual level. Secondly, as the land has to be peopled to have a chance of hosting a nation, its unapproachability stems from the fact that the building of a nation is a continuous process of one’s being born from some others, including not only one’s biological or physical coming to existence, but also his or her being “born again” against the background (under inspiration of or in opposition to) of some others—for example, “saints or sages”. Thirdly, the process in question is continuous, yet also presupposes discontinuity, that is implies one’s being ready to “be born again, that is to say, suffer conversion; conversion is to be turned around, reversed” (Cavell & idem, 2013, p. 91). It assumes one’s feasible critical approach both towards a status quo ante and an extant status quo, and their readiness for rethinking and retelling it. Thus, the new nation (e.g., America), by definition, is to be said never to be finished and fully approachable. It can be added that the incompleteness of the nation’s formation ensues from its openness to further newcomers: America “was to be the land where the individual could grow freely, wildly if he or she wished; but it was also a place to which strangers could come to put down roots, the place to which pilgrims and immigrants come home” (Cavell & idem, 1992a, p. 157).

Cavell underscores that in “Experience” a recurrent theme is the transition from the old to the new: “old and new testaments, old and new philosophy, old and new births, old and new individuals, old and new Englands, old and new worlds” (Cavell & idem, 2013). The transition proceeds through an interruption, or leaving something behind, and then conversion: “In a new world everything is to be lost and everything is to be found” (2013). Cavell, as well as Emerson, alludes to the aforementioned juxtapositions to philosophically explore the concept and the specific character of Americanness (cf. Cavell, 1988b; see Conant, 2005), yet the mere idea of the transition from old to new—figuratively embodied in “this new yet unapproachable America”—may be understood more broadly as well, as an educational idea of one’s transgressing towards a new individual and towards the world which he or she has come to live in, where he or she will transform his or her “genius into practical power” (Emerson, 1844).

The establishing of both a new self and the forming of a new life world is, for Emerson, closely connected with the linguistic sphere (see Cavell & idem, 1992, p. 134–135, 1988c). Like self-acknowledgment consists in authentically saying “I”, “I exist”, in a similar vein, it can be said that the founding of a nation consists in authentically saying “we”, “we exist”. When is such a saying authentic? According to Cavell, it is so when our language is in close touch with our experience, when it forms a commonly experienced form of life. The idea of a linguistically mediated common form of life is parallel to what Ludwig Wittgenstein called, in Philosophical Investigations, language games, where linguistic expressions, if not used “idly”, are embedded in our practices, habits and institutions (see Cavell, 1979, pp. 169–190; Wittgenstein, 1986). Thus, making our forms of life, institutions and practices discussable as well as developing our common “native” language: naming, justifying, understanding metaphors, accepting symbols
(e.g., anthems, founding myths), etc., is actually a “way of founding a nation, writing its constitution, constituting its citizens” and a way of achieving “a new degree of culture” (Cavell & idem, 2013).

What is more typical of Emerson here is his introduction to this quasi-Wittgensteinian thinking a concept of experience that is essentially active, not only receptive (the latter being called by Emerson a “paltry empiricism”). It is manifest in his conviction that the constituent and indispensable element of experience as Emerson understands it is mood: life can be “described as a flux of moods” (Emerson, 1844) and thus moods, or attitudes, play a role of “a priori” categories within which life can be experienced. What is crucial is that moods are not strictly a priori in a Kantian sense (see Cavell & idem, 1992, pp. 125-129), since we have some influence on our moods (while for Kant we cannot simply create categories of pure understanding, they are given to us as forms). Accordingly, how our world looks depends on our mood, or attitude towards it (Cavell & idem, 2013). As expected, moods also influence our linguistic expressions of life.

4. “The education of grownups”, moral perfectionism and the idea of democracy

The indispensable tension between the individual and the social as well as between receptiveness and activeness in forming our social, democratic life is rendered in Cavell’s idea of the education of grownups. When originally introducing the concept in The Claim of Reason, Cavell has in mind primarily philosophy:

This seems to me a task that warrants the name of philosophy. It is also the description of something we might call education. In the face of the questions posed in Augustine, Luther, Rousseau, Thoreau . . . we are children; we do not know how to go on with them, what ground we may occupy. In this light, philosophy becomes the education of grownups.
(Cavell, 1979, p. 125)

However, in his later books, especially in Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome (Cavell, 1990), a reading of Emersonian perfectionism akin to this is developed not only with reference to strictly philosophical texts, but also to literature and popular culture, including, for example, film (see Arcilla, 2012; Cavell, 2005). As Saito convincingly argued (Saito, 2005, 2012), these two ideas can be conjoined in one project. What is crucial in this account is that perfectionism is not viewed in typically psychological terms of one’s not being able to tolerate any imperfections in his or her actions and enterprises, but rather in philosophical terms of one’s being continuously prompted to develop his or her self-knowledge as well as the understanding of others. It is “a kind of retrospective, explanatory afterthought” (Arcilla, 2012, p. 153) aimed at one’s (re) discovering his or her own and unique way.

The first assumption underlying this project is the moral imperative to pursue one’s self-intelligibility:

Moral Perfectionism’s contribution to thinking about the moral necessity of making oneself intelligible (one’s actions, one’s sufferings, one’s position) is (…) its emphasis before all on becoming intelligible to oneself, as if the threat to one’s moral coherence comes most insistently from that quarter, from one’s sense of obscurity to oneself, as if we are subject to demands we cannot formulate, leaving us unjustified, as if our lives condemn themselves. Perfectionism’s emphasis on culture or cultivation is (…) to be understood in connection with this search for intelligibility, or say this search for direction in what seems a scene of moral chaos, the scene of a dark place in which one has lost one’s way (Cavell, 1990, p. xxxi-xxxii).

Although self-understanding as construed above is thought never to be ultimately completed and closed, it is—as a process—a vital condition for understanding the world and others. As Arcilla remarks, “unless one is intelligible to oneself (…) one cannot be in good conscience confident that one is responsive enough to all the responsibilities that belong to one, let alone presume that one
is in a position to judge the intelligible status of others. One cannot deliberate morally without this minimal self-confidence” (Arcilla, 2012, pp. 152–153). It is important to once more underline that this coming to self-intelligibility should be a self-reliant practice: not one that focuses on uncritically accepting the role assigned to him or her by someone or something (e.g., tradition), but rather on self-authoring his or her status. This practice should rely on “finding one’s way rather than on getting oneself or another to take the way” (Cavell, 1990, p. xxxii).

The second assumption is that to create oneself, one needs some other person: initially his or her presence and voice, thereafter a text. The former is pertinent to what Cavell, after Thoreau, keeps calling the “mother tongue” (Cavell & idem, 1992b, pp. 4, 35), that is, the native language, ordinary, natural, and familiar. It is, first of all, the language that is spoken and heard, and thus learnt unintentionally and intuitively from our mothers. By means of it, we start being socialised: “The mother tongue is the essential starting point of one’s being initiated into the language community, being characterized by immediate, intimate relationships” (Saito, 2012, p. 176). The mother tongue introduces us into the inherited meanings of words, acquaints us with the names of things that surround us, and equips us with phrases through which we act in the social world. After that, a text, the written language, appears in the form of “the father tongue”—the term also borrowed from Thoreau—which is “a reserved and select expression, too significant to be heard by the ear, which must be born again in order to speak” (Cavell & idem, 1992b, p. 3). In contrast to the mother tongue, it is learnt intentionally and often effortfully. Instead of familiarising us with inherited meanings and conventionalised linguistic practices, it undermines the extent, conventional, clichéd senses, approaching them critically and inviting to both a dialogue with them and their deeper understanding. Consequently, instead of introducing us into the community, it rather entices us away from it. According to Cavell and Emerson, this process seems to be indispensable for individualism.

However, in Cavell’s view, the continual process of forming oneself involves both one’s abandoning the familiar epitomised by the mother tongue and one’s coming back to it so as to make the novel, hitherto strange, content symbolised by the father tongue familiar, thus enriching the communal way of life: “we need both mother and father in order to experience the world in its full-blown form: we need always both initiation into and departure from language community” (Saito, 2012, p. 176).

The third idea concerns the text as an embodiment of the presence of the other speaking, or rather writing, to us in the father tongue. For Cavell, it is not every literary or philosophical work that can fit the aim of an individual’s self-creation, but it has to be the text able to take the position of a friend. The figure of the friend in the context of Bildung is construed as a figure of a perfectionist friend: one, as Emerson writes, “whose conviction, in one’s moral intelligibility draws one to discover it, to find words and deeds in which to express it, in which to enter the conversation of justice” (Cavell, 1990, p. xxxii). Such a “friend (discovered or constructed) represents the standpoint of perfection” (Cavell, 1990, p. 59) and prompts us to extricate ourselves from the conformity that we fall into. Far from being an ideal to be blindly followed, he or she rather spurs us to find our own way through reflection. In this sense, although Cavell speaks first and foremost about philosophical texts, we can accept that the perfectionist reading is not restricted to academic philosophy, but also comprises the ideas presented in literature.

What features is such a text-friend supposed to have? The situation of the perfectionist educational dialog with such a text presupposes some lostness or obscurity, on the part of the learner, about his or her own intelligibility. In this state of lostness, one either remains in or has a temptation to fall into the state of conformity. It also presupposes that a text has to be able to become a teacher, one that can help the learner to get out of her or his imbroglio. However, the text ought not to be thought of as a guidebook, or vade mecum, that solves a set of particular problems or a collection of drug prescriptions to cure their ailments, in which case the learner would only strengthen his or her self-obscurity and conformism. Instead, it is expected to help one
find his or her own way. As Arcilla notes, “the friend expresses his or her friendship, in part, by taking seriously the lost one’s discourse as a piece of reasoning, however flawed, rather than coding it as a collection of verbal symptoms” (2012, p. 156).

In Cavell’s view, perfectionist texts can be singled out for it to form a specific genre (Cavell, 1990, pp. 4–7). Arcilla, aiming at explicating this genre, sets two challenges to it, both concerning its mode of address: first, the book has to draw the attention of those “so preoccupied with themselves to make an effort to understand its writing”; second, it has to offer and “communicate something that could help them become more intelligible to themselves” (2012, p. 156). In this vein, it can be said that perfectionist texts have to speak not about readers, but rather talk to them. At the same time, they have to feature some acknowledgment of the state of lostness and render “a vivid understanding of this state” (2012, p. 157), of the lack of self-intelligibility, preferably the author’s experience of self-obscurity. Although Cavell speaks not only about books counted as perfectionist that display such a confessional aspect of an individual’s predicament, but also about those concerning illnesses of society in general—like Nietzsche, Kierkegaard, Heidegger, Rousseau, Wittgenstein, etc.—Arcilla insists on their all expressing “the unmistakable involvement of a first-person account” (2012, p. 157). This constitutes a kinship between a writer (a teacher) and a learner (a reader) that enables the latter’s opening to what the text offers him or her and the hope that it can really bring some help. And, again, what is taught and learnt does not rely on the reader’s accepting any direct instruction; instead, the text amicably accompanies the reader in his or her predicament. The crucial difference between the teacher and the learner is that the former, once having been in a state of confusion, has found both a correct and inimitable linguistic expression of what he or she has been through, while the latter has not. The teacher thereby has made his experience intelligible to the wider public and bequeathed it as a text to the reading community.

The further question is how the learner is bound to deal with such a text. Following Emerson, it can be said that for the reader the text is a provocation (Emerson, 1838). What the learner is provoked to do is “to place myself in the way of the text’s claims, challenging the text to back up its view of the world with reasons—and thus drawing the counterchallenge to account for why I see the world differently” (Arcilla, 2012, p. 158). Then, he or she is expected to juxtapose the text read with his or her own Weltsicht as well as to develop his or her own critical reasoning through conversation with that of the text. Therefore, the perfectionist reading in the father tongue involves the active forming of one’s own stance: through criticism, tentativeness in accepting the text’s claims with its presuppositions and reasons for it, challenging and correcting advanced reasoning from both the author’s and one’s own perspective, etc., ultimately leads to shaping one’s individual views. This dialectical process aims at fostering one’s grammatical self: its point is to come to understand “oneself and one’s world in one’s own terms”, to find a better way of one’s “making sense of life” (Arcilla, 2012, p. 159) and of one’s action in it. The people “need to be able to articulate who they are, how they see the world and one another, and their sense of their tasks in this world and community” (Norris, 2017, p. 143). In turn, my own linguistic expression of my experience has the potential to become a perfectionist teacher friend for others: it can be sympathetic to some other readers (learners) in their state of opacity and invite them to find their own way through a critical discussion of my own vision. Along these lines, the education of grownups is taken to proceed.

The fourth assumption of the Cavellian view on perfectionism says that the forming of an individual and the building of a community is interrelated, dialectic, and, in the last resort, democratic. After being initiated into community through the mother tongue, one needs “to break away from the pack” and embark on a project leading to self-authentication and self-acknowledgment. Yet, in this mere process, an individual needs a certain other who speaks to him or her in the father tongue: in other words, he or she, assuming the position of a learner, expects a teacher who is able to display a genuine understanding of the learner’s self-obscurity and to express a perfectionist friendship. Paradigmatically, the friend is to be a book, a text.
Thus, on the one hand, the learner disengages from society, but, on the other hand, he or she needs society—i.e., and culture, literature, and language—to acquire his or her unique self. Having come to the understanding that his or her individuality is transient, in continuous change, the learner also agrees that it is, in principle, always perfectible, awaiting to be made significant and fulfilling. On account of that, he or she also comes to realise that everyone both needs a teacher and can become a teacher for others: as Cavell keeps saying, “we are educations for each other” (Cavell, 1990, p. 31). In consequence, the “movement away can also be a movement toward a different kind of society (…), if one encounters fellow searches—and their texts” (Arcilla, 2012, p. 161), which means a society in which we can make ourselves intelligible to others and in which mutual learning has a chance to be cultivated. Such a society is meant to be a democracy that aims to form itself and unceasingly reconsider its way of life. As Saito concluded: “In the context of democracy as a way of living that involves the question of how we should live, each individual has a responsibility in contributing her response to her society” (Saito, 2012, p. 173).

Lest the members of the democratic community become conformist and the community turn to be stagnated and idle, the very idea of “learning for learning’s sake” should be regarded worthwhile. Therefore, the democratic ideal is an ideal of a community of learning beings, i.e., individuals that are receptive to different ideas, able to deliberate on them and take a critical approach towards them; at the same time they should be open to rethink their own standpoints in the light of other views. As Arcilla observes, such a perfectionist democratic community might seem “negligibly small” (2012, p. 161) since most people seem to accept, at least to some degree, their conformism and find their role in society to be clear, even if it is not sufficiently satisfying. They usually do not come to think, let alone to admit to themselves, that they lack self-intelligibility in their lives. Such a consequence is inevitable allowing for the fact that the vision of democracy as a community of learning beings, or of “the education of grownups”, is asserted to be an ideal to follow. However, our pursuit of what Cavell after Emerson calls “this new yet unapproachable America” can be fostered especially by educational institutions teaching liberal education and cultural ones, thus widening the scope of perfectionist democracy. In that “everybody is vulnerable to disorienting loss and disappointment”, then “anybody may find himself or herself receptive to perfectionism” (Arcilla, 2012, p. 162).

The fifth and last point concerns the limits of otherness. Namely, when considering the possibility of entering into a dialogue with perfectionist texts, the question of both historical—i.e., diachronic—distance appears and the issue of cultural incommensurability—i.e., synchronic—does. In other words, might it be that the text is so different from our own lifeworld and experience that it, by virtue of this plain fact, cannot even aspire to be our friend and teacher? Does our community focus on its own traditions or is it also possible for it to advance and follow the idea of world citizenship in the mould of Martha Nussbaum (Nussbaum, 2003, p. 12 et passim). The answer is that the idea of democratic citizenship comprises and presupposes the openness to otherness: both other people with their backgrounds—which is of special importance for Western, multicultural societies—and other texts. At no time and circumstances is a particular text too otherly for us to be totally incomprehensible. Assuming that this text does not only speak to the “likeminded and likebodied”, we can reasonably accept that it “houses some kind of understanding of our world, whoever we are” (Arcilla, 2012, p. 159). In Cavell’s, as well as Emerson’s, view, the other—irrespective of their similarity or closeness to us—is postulated to be neighbouring, although often symbolised in a text written in the father tongue. His nextness as a friend and teacher is an indispensable context for my own individuality and self-acknowledgement. As Saito comments on the issue, “The other is next to my self—not only outside the self but also within my self—confronting me with the possibility of further perfection, as the sign of life, letting the self find its own breath (Saito, 2012, p. 180). In the same vein, we as a community need others to be perpetually fixing and acknowledging who we—taken as together—are, and to shape our common public life.
5. Conclusion

Cavell’s reading of Emerson can be seen as having two interrelated strands: the grammatical self and the linguistic community. The process of forming the individual involves both one’s separating and coming back to the community. The grammaticality, or the linguistic character of the self, means that its constitution proceeds through language: first, the ordinary spoken language of the community; second, the written, literary, and philosophical language of tradition. The proper Bildung relies on mutual education in the perfectionist spirit, which mostly concerns grownups, that is, people capable of taking a critical approach towards the texts read, and in which a book grows into the status of a teacher and friend. Through a dialogue with books of the perfectionist genre, an individual can acquire his or her self-reliance and self-acknowledgment, finding a proper and inimicable linguistic expression of his or her own experience and views. Thus, he or she can afterwards write a text to become a teacher for other readers. Such Bildung leads to the founding of a particular social form of life within a nation or a community. Both creating the self and shaping the common life are continuous processes requiring incessant reconsiderations. They both entail mutual education and presuppose democracy as their precondition.

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