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## Tragedy and Moral Insight: Stanley Cavell on Tragedy

In the present paper I undertake to present and discuss Stanley Cavell's views on tragedy and its relations to the phenomenon of skepticism; both subjects of concern to this distinguished philosopher since the publication in *Must We Mean What We Say?*<sup>1</sup> of the essays "Knowing and Acknowledging" and "The Avoidance of Love" – the latter famously devoted to Shakespeare's *King Lear*.

Thus what developed into a comprehensive view of tragedy in *The Claim of Reason*<sup>2</sup> and – more particularly – *Disowning Knowledge in Six Plays of Shakespeare*<sup>3</sup> – may be traced back to the very beginning of Cavell's struggle with the challenge of skepticism. In "Knowing and Acknowledging" the argument is centred on that well-chewed chestnut, the possibility of knowing another mind, in particular whether we can *know* another person's pain. In the essay adherents of strong epistemological claims are set against the sceptics. Cavell discusses some attempts to refute the skeptic's rejection of knowledge, and after some intricate reasoning he advances proof that too strong claims have been for-

<sup>1</sup> Stanley Cavell, *Must We Mean What We Say?*, paperback ed., Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1976. (First published 1969). (Hereafter abbreviated as MS.)

<sup>2</sup> Stanley Cavell, *The Claim of Reason*, paperback ed., Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1982. (First published 1979.)

<sup>3</sup> Stanley Cavell, *Disowning Knowledge In Six Plays of Shakespeare*, paperback ed., Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1987. (Abbreviated as DK.)

warded on both sides; the skeptic in his denials and the anti-skeptic in his epistemological affirmations. In the course of his argument Cavell introduces the important concept of *acknowledging*. It does not make sense to say that the person in pain *knows* his pain. He is in pain, and he feels impelled to give words to his state. In a sense he admits, confesses to his state: he acknowledges it. Cavell is moving towards

a special knowledge, or region of the concept of knowledge, one which is not a function of certainty. This region has been pointed to in noticing that a first person acknowledgment of pain is not an expression of certainty but an expression of pain, that is, an exhibiting of the *object* of knowledge. (MS,258–259)

The first person's acknowledgment of pain constitutes a claim on the second person, who in his turn has to perform the act of reciprocal acknowledgment. That is, he may do it, or he may not, but the claim is there:

So when I say that "We must acknowledge another's suffering, and we do that by responding to a claim upon our sympathy," I do not mean that we always in fact *have* sympathy, nor that we always ought to have it. The claim of suffering may go unanswered. We may feel lots of things – sympathy, *Schadenfreude*, nothing. If one says that this is a failure to acknowledge another's suffering, surely this would not mean that we fail, in such cases, *know* that he is suffering? It may or may not. The point, however, is that the concept of acknowledgment is evidenced equally by its failure as by its success. It is not a description of a given response but a category in terms of which a given response is evaluated. (MS,263–264)

Acknowledging is the only means to overcome the sense of separateness that overcomes any person "impaled" upon his painful sensations, as well as the second person who fails to live up to his claims. Acknowledgment requires effort. Cavell comments on the possible state of mind pursuant to such failure:

A "failure to know" might just mean a piece of ignorance, an absence of something, a blank. A "failure to acknowledge" is the presence of something, a confusion, an indifference, a cal-

lousness, an exhaustion, a coldness. Spiritual emptiness is not a blank. (MS,264)

Here it seems to me that we are at the problematic opening out to the question of tragedy, which Cavell has pursued ever since. Tragedy explores what follows from the failure of acknowledgment on the part of its protagonists; their *avoidance of love*. The separateness is an existential fact, which is only deepened, with terrible consequences, when acknowledgment does not take place. It is wholly characteristic of the modern European mind, that what is essentially an incurable state, is turned into an epistemological problem, a quarrel over the possibility of knowing another mind. In a phrase that occurs again and again in Cavell's writings we come to take "a metaphysical finitude as an intellectual lack". (MS,263) It explains why the problematics of skepticism becomes central to an understanding of modern tragedy, and the exigencies of knowing so inherent to its thematics.

The above much simplified, indeed broken, summary of Cavell's intricate argument was only intended as an introduction to his central concerns, and to establish the challenge to acknowledge as the focussing-point of his exploration the varieties of tragedy.

Stanley Cavell's essays on various plays by William Shakespeare were widely admired and as widely discussed during the seventies and eighties. When he brought them out collected under the title *Disowning Knowledge In Six Plays of Shakespeare* he provided an introduction which gives an instructive overview of his work. In this introduction one notices some diffidence of tone in certain passages. His are "aerial views" of the works in question, he does not command the historical learning to substantiate his wide-ranging historical theses, his method is a "poor thing", and read as *argument* of the central issues the introductory presentation is "a terribly poor one". (For the substantiating argumentation the reader has to turn to *The Claim of Reason*, where he, among many other matters, establishes "a best case of knowing" as an alternative to skeptic and anti-skeptic alike.) Remarks like those above are probably included to make the reader take it all in the right spirit. He warns against taking a too inflexible a line in thinking of the connection between skepticism and tragedy; the essays are provisional, continuable. But the reader would do wrong to overlook the carefully lim-

ited perspective; the readings are *partial* in a strongly Emersonian sense. The qualities brought out in the works are of a momentous importance. And against the diffidence of tone is set the provocative thesis, that “a map of the territory of skepticism provides, or is, a map of Shakespearean regions” (DK,19). By exploring one you explore the other; one finds, indeed, a similarity of structure between them.

Cavell’s argument consists of at least three major components: An historical thesis, an analysis of skepticism, and a view of tragedy. The first concerns a major development in Western intellectual history, the second deals with the predominant role of skepticism in this development, and the third with the similarity of structure between skepticism and tragedy, as mentioned above. The interest of his contribution emerges from the combination of the three; each by itself may not be sufficient to sustain interest to the literary scholar. And, of course, what gives weight to the combined argument, is its foundation in the author’s substantial epistemological and ethical investigations in *The Claim of Reason*, not entered into here.

Now for the historical thesis: Put at its simplest, it states that a catastrophe or crisis happened to the Western world at about the time of Shakespeare. This is not news; what is particular to Cavell’s argument is the importance he attributes to skepticism in subsequent developments. Be it noted here, that we are dealing not with skepticism as known from Hellenistic times, but skepticism as it entered into the search for certainty in modern times, as for instance in the case of Descartes and the tradition derived from him. The issue is “how to live at all in a groundless world” (DK,3). It is not confined to the problem of knowledge, but, as already mentioned, Cavell finds it wholly characteristic of the Western mind to treat “a metaphysical finitude as an intellectual lack”. This sets the scene for the epistemological quandary – and for skepticism. The historical argument is partly based on the “intuition”, “that the advent of skepticism as manifested in Descartes’s *Meditations* is already in full existence in Shakespeare, from the time of the great tragedies in the first years of the seventeenth century, in the generation preceding that of Descartes” (DK,3). And he goes on to say:

I do not command the learning to argue seriously on historical evidence that the shaking of the ground of human exis-

tence, in what philosophy calls skepticism, finds its way into Shakespeare's words – call this ground authority, or legitimacy, in the realms of religion, of politics, of knowledge, of love, of family, of friendship – hence to argue that the unique endlessness of the Shakespearean order of words is a function of that shaking. (DK,4)

Nevertheless, on the strength of his “intuition”, he proceeds to say that Shakespeare's plays is the very place to go for the historical evidence needful to support the historical thesis. But this is, of course, just the beginning of the story. What started at the time of Shakespeare and his contemporaries is still with us; the author finds an “increasing velocity in the split between subjectivity and objectivity, or between the private and the presentable” (DK,27). Which implies that the exigencies of the skeptical problematic is as acute as ever, and which raises the question whether the investigation of the tragic structure inherent in skepticism may throw some light on post-Shakespearean drama as well. So much for the historical thesis – in a truly rudimentary form.

Skepticism thus is part and parcel of the historical trauma experienced by the Western mind in Shakespearean times, and which we have been living with even since. It is one aspect of the search for certainty of knowing which found its clearest expression in the meditations of Descartes. In his major work Cavell seeks to find ground for a “best case of knowledge”, in an attempt to salvage human knowing from the deductive threat of skepticism. Descartes mustered all his power of doubt in an attempt to eliminate every uncertainty in his search for true knowledge. As is well known, he was left with the idea of God as the only reliable bit of knowing. He thought himself able to produce an idea of a person and of a material object from ideas derived from his own experience; the idea of the divine alone was possessed of a perfection beyond the abilities of experiential ideas to produce. The underlying argument was, that man, unable to know this, would not be able to know anything. What Cavell calls “the stake” in skepticism consists in the collapse of a “best case” of knowledge, with an ensuing loss of certainty with regard to the world of objects as well as the world of fellow men: “Nothing without, perhaps nothing within.” The radicalization of skepticism, with its “threatened withdrawal of the world – of the realm

of the cultural, the social, the political, the religious” is reflected in the Shakespearean thematics studied in the various essays collected in *Disowning Knowledge*.

We move one step closer to tragedy when we consider what might be called the “drama of skepticism”. The skeptic’s search for certainty does not proceed in an air of calm: “It is not just careful description, or practical investigation, under way here.” (DK,8) The pursuit of knowledge takes place in a field of forces; the whole procedure is invested with powerful emotions. It is here that the philosophy really comes alive. There is discovered “an animism, so to speak, in the philosophical idea of doubt itself” (DK,7). The skeptical philosopher attempts a grasp on phenomena which, when it fails, brings about a violent rejective response.

In the descriptions of the skeptic’s search for certainty some fairly strong language makes itself heard in Cavell’s otherwise rather measured formulations. “Everyone knows that *something* is mad in the skeptic’s fantastic quest for certainty.” (DK,8) Instead of careful description and practical investigation we sense some “hyperbolic, unprecedented attention in play”; it is almost as if the investigator demands some sort of *response* from the object of his attention. The author finds “a violence” in human knowing, later developed into an idea of knowledge “under the aegis of dominion, of the concept of a concept as a matter, say, of grasping a thing”:

In Kant this concept of the concept is pictured as that of synthesizing things, putting together appearances, yoking, to yield objects of knowledge: Knowledge itself is explicitly, as opposed to the reception of sensuous intuitions, an active thing – Kant says spontaneous; intuitions alone occur to us passively. (DK,9)

But it is a procedure imbued with futility, exposed as it is to the threat of skepticism. In the “grip”, the “strangehold” of skepticism – to the explorer exposed to the “threat” of skepticism – the gap discovered in “Knowing and Acknowledging” opens up, as illustrated by the responses of Othello: “It is against the (fantasied) possibility of overcoming this hyperbolic separateness that the skeptic’s (disappointed, intellectualized, impossible, imperative, hyperbolic) demand makes sense.” (DK,9)

The “radicalness”, its “fanaticism” – defined by Kant as “a distorted expectation of reason” (DK,17) – now results in a turning against the world, illustrated by Lear’s “avoidance” of Cordelia,

an instance of the annihilation inherent in the skeptical problematic, that skepticism’s “doubt” is motivated not by (not even where it is expressed as) a (misguided) intellectual scrupulousness but by a (displaced) denial, by a self-consuming disappointment that seeks world-consuming revenge. (DK,6)

The very precipitousness of the Lear story, “the velocity of the banishments and of the consequences of the banishments, figured the precipitousness of skepticism’s banishment of the world” (DK,5). Here is laid bare the third component of his argument: the similarity of structure between skepticism and tragedy.

This, then, is, something like the basis for Cavell’s epistemological readings of Shakespearean tragedy, based as it is the claim, that tragedy is “the working out of a response to skepticism – as I now like to put the matter, that tragedy is an interpretation of what skepticism is itself an interpretation of” (DK,5–6).

The very relentlessness of tragedy reflects the merciless stranglehold of fanatical skeptical doubt; here we are not allowed to escape the consequences of the process set in motion, of the fact that,

the failure to acknowledge a best case of the other is a denial of that other, presaging the death of the other, say by stoning, or by hanging; and the death of our capacity to acknowledge as such, the turning of our hearts to stone, or their bursting. The necessary reflexiveness of spiritual torture. (DK,138)

This is the process as witnessed in the case of Othello.

Cavell’s essay on *Othello* is of an inordinate subtlety. Here only a few of its argumentative strains will be brought out, in order to illustrate how his partial, epistemological reading, in the light of the problematics of skepticism, may enhance our appreciation of this play, as well as others.

“With his ‘jealousy’, “Othello’s violence studies the human use of knowledge under the consequence of skepticism.” (DK,9) Cavell goes back to the *Meditations* of Descartes. Put at its simplest, his analysis

brings out the fact, that the presence of the idea of divine perfection, which could come from no other source than the divine itself, is a prerequisite for man's upholding a sense of his own humanity. Without this idea, "my own nature would necessarily not be what it is" (DK,127). If that idea dies, human nature equally dies. Not only the fact of my own existence, but the integrity of it, depends upon this idea:

And so these meditations are about the finding of self-knowledge after all; of the knowledge of a human self by a human self. ... That the integrity of my (human, finite) existence may depend on the fact and on the idea of another being's existence, and on the possibility of *proving* that existence, an existence conceived from my very dependence and incompleteness, hence conceived as perfect, and conceived as producing me "in some sense in (its) own image" – these are thoughts that take me to a study of *Othello*. (DK,127–28)

There is a good deal of the skeptic's fanaticism and intensity about Othello's response to his own situation. In Cavell's reading Othello has a conception of himself as the perfect romantic hero, with a need for confirmation on the part of Desdemona. His need is similar to that of Descartes for the perfection of God: "His absolute stake in his purity, and its confirmation in hers, is shown in what he feels he has lost in losing Desdemona's confirmation: '...my name, that was as fresh/ As Dian's visage, is now begrim'd, and black/ As mine own face.'" This is as quoted by Cavell. (DK,130) What Othello has done, is to place Desdemona in the situation of God, in a like position of perfection and purity. What he cannot take, is the loss of perfection attendant upon the revelation that she is a woman of flesh and blood.

*Othello* is not as much a drama of jealousy, as the drama of a man suffering the pangs of doubt in the stranglehold of skepticism. The surprise lies not so much in the fact that a man like Othello should believe a man like Iago; it is in Iago's power to offer the one piece of evidence which enables Othello to believe *something*. In this Othello mirrors the skeptic's fanatic demand for certainty. If he can believe what Iago offers, he knows something. If he cannot believe this, he cannot know anything. In the sequence of events leading up to the murder of Desdemona we find a development similar to the skeptic's revenge on



the world: The separateness, the violence, she being turned into stone, and finally the death of the woman, the world. Here we have the logic, the emotion and the scene of skepticism epitomized (DK,128).

There is a good deal more to Cavell's reading of *Othello* than what appears from the above presentation, where great liberty has been taken with the author's own careful and intricate reasoning. The idea has been to bring out the similarity between the scene of skepticism and that of the drama. Cavell's reading persuades in the way it brings out, and motivates, the all-or-nothing structure of the play – if I don't know this, I know nothing – and the precipitousness of the action. Cavell explains Iago's role without resorting to "realistic" motivations, which surely fail to account for the drama he sets on foot. The influence of Iago mirrors the poison of skepticism. Its main victim is, of course, Othello, but the poison infects just about everybody else in the play. Iago's exultation at his own success is a measure of the potency of skeptical doubt once it is activated: "Iago is everything Othello must deny, and which, denied, not killed but works on, like poison, like Furies."

Cavell traces the impact of skepticism in, among other plays, Lear's failure to acknowledge and in the doubtings of Hamlet. The works of Shakespeare includes, however, attempts to overcome death-dealing skepticism, notably in *The Winter's Tale*, where the resuscitation of Hermione betokens the possibility of a return to life of what has been ossified. The search for a philosophical contribution to the establishing of the possibility of this kind of recovery is a central topic in Cavell's *In Quest of the Ordinary: Lines of Skepticism and Romanticism*<sup>1</sup>.

But has Cavell's view of tragedy and skepticism a general validity? This ought to be the case, if skepticism, in his interpretation of it, makes an ingredient inherent to the modern mind. And if his view that the gap between subject and object is on the increase with an ever greater velocity, the exigencies of skepticism would be there to be studied in almost any serious drama of note. This is a matter for literary scholars to pursue. Much confirming evidence springs to mind imme-

<sup>1</sup> Stanley Cavell, *In Quest of the Ordinary: Lines of Skepticism and Romanticism*, Chicago, Chicago University Press 1988.

diately. One may point to the uncertainties of Racine's *Phèdre*, the challenging denials of Mephistopheles in the first part of Goethe's *Faust*, to say nothing of the unreliability of just about every bit of information in plays like *Rosmersholm* and *Ghosts* by Ibsen, and *The Father* and *The Dance of Death* by Strindberg.

But what about tragedy and moral insight? Serious drama informed by skepticism will at every turn be of relevance to morals, since it will be concerned with the ethical quandaries attendant upon failures of acknowledgment. Which again places drama at the very centre of the problematics of modernity.