

“This Most Human Predicament”: Cavell on Language, Intention, and Desire in Shakespeare

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In the second paragraph of “The Avoidance of Love,” the earliest of his essays on Shakespeare, Cavell asks, “What has discouraged attention from investigations of character?” in Shakespeare criticism of the mid-twentieth century. “What [...] has [instead] specifically motivated an absorbing attention to words?”, as in the criticism of William Empson and G. Wilson Knight. The answer that Cavell offers is that it is “the merest assumption,” foisted off on us “by some philosophy or other, that [literary] characters are not people, [and] that what can be known about people cannot be known about characters” (DK, 40).¹ Cavell then goes on to challenge this assumption by noting that it is at the very least quite natural “to account for the behavior of characters” by applying “to them [psychological predicates, like ‘is in pain,’ ‘is ironic,’ ‘is jealous,’ and ‘is thinking of ...’]” (DK, 40).

In one sense, then, Cavell is committed instead to treating characters as or as importantly like real people. This might well raise the worry that criticism based on this commitment is slack, inattentive, and emptily impressionistic relative to the real work of the plays, as if the practitioner of this criticism has somehow forgotten that plays are made materially out of words. If we are left only with the thoughts, say, that Hamlet is melancholy, Coriolanus is angry, or Othello is jealous, this worry might well be justified. Kenneth Burke, for example, charges the character criticism or “portraiture” practiced by A. C. Bradley and Samuel Johnson with just this kind of empty impressionism.

1. All references to Cavell’s Shakespeare essays will be to the appearance in *Disowning Knowledge: In Seven Plays of Shakespeare*, updated edn. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003). Stanley Bates usefully challenges the assumption that characters are not people and argues that our very idea of what a character is is formed as strongly by our experience of figures in literary texts, where plot abstracts and highlights related but temporally separated displays of temperament, interest, and son on, as by experience of actually existing people. “Character,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophy and Literature*, ed. Richard Eldridge (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 393-419.

The risk in “portraiture” of the Bradleyan sort (and Samuel Johnson has done it admirably too, also with reference to Othello) is that the critic ends where he should begin. [...] Let the critic be as impressionistic as he wants, if he but realize that his impressions are the beginning of his task as a critic, not the end of it. Indeed, the richer his impressions the better, if he goes on to show how the author produced them. But the great risk in “conclusive” statements about a work is that they give us the feeling of conclusions when the real work of analysis is still before us.²

Here, for Burke, the real work of analysis must consist not in having impressions of characters as types, but instead in close attention to the specific words that Shakespeare or any other dramatist has used to make the characters who they are.

As Cavell rightly remarks on behalf of Coleridge and Bradley, however, and in turn also on behalf of the linguistic criticism of Empson and Wilson Knight, the assumption that interest in characters competes with interest in their specific words should surely be rejected.

Can Coleridge or Bradley really be understood as interested in characters *rather than* in the words of the play; or are the writings of Empson or G. Wilson Knight well used in saying that they are interested in what is happening in the words *rather than* what is happening in the speakers of the words? [...] The most curious feature of the shift and conflict between character criticism and verbal analysis is that it should have taken place at all. How could any serious critic ever have forgotten that to care about specific characters is to care about the utterly specific words they say when and as they say them; or that we care about the utterly specific words of a play because certain men and women are having to give voice to them. Yet apparently both frequently happen. My purpose here is not to urge that in reading Shakespeare’s plays one put words back into the characters speaking them, and replace characters from our possession back into their words. The point is rather to learn something about what prevents these commendable activities from taking place. (DK, 39, 41)

2. Kenneth Burke, “Othello: An Essay to Illustrate a Method,” in *Kenneth Burke on Shakespeare*, ed. Scott L. Newstok (West Lafayette, IN: Parlor Press, 2007), 85.

As Cavell's engagements with Shakespeare develop throughout the essays that compose *Disowning Knowledge*, it emerges that the sorts of things that prevent these commendable activities include a materialist metaphysics (according to which the only real thing composing a play is pattern of ink on paper and the only thing composing an action is a bodily motion with an inner material cause) plus a kind of self-protective fear of engagement on the parts of readers, who might find their metaphysical and moral commitments challenged by the thought that some characters in dramas make available exemplarily valuable or horrific possibilities of action as such. As readers, that is, we tend to protect ourselves by covertly assuming models of reality, knowledge, and self that may be insupportable and that express an overriding commitment to the value of control, as achievable by detached internal intelligence facing off against inert, mere material nature. (Here the metaphysics and the fear may be internally related: fear of exposure to moral criticism of oneself by the text may motivate the pursuit of control over it, and commitment to detached control may help to suppress fear of exposure.) The work of challenging both materialist metaphysics and self-protective fears via readings of Shakespeare's plays then both requires and centers on the commendable activities of putting the words back into the characters speaking them and replacing characters from our (too-knowing) possession back into their self-possession in, by, and through their words. Or as Cavell puts it in the *Coriolanus* essay in his most direct methodological remark,

I might characterize my intention in spelling out what I call these fantasies [of *Coriolanus*] as an attempt to get at the origin of words, not the origin of their meaning exactly but of their production, of the value they have when and where they occur. I have characterized something like this ambition of criticism variously over the years, and related it to what I understand as the characteristic procedure of ordinary language philosophy (DK, 156).

From the very beginning of his career, Cavell's understanding of the characteristic procedure of ordinary language philosophy involved less a commitment to demotic ordinary speech as such, as a norm for all speech situations, than a psychoanalytically

inflected commitment to figuring out why *anyone* might utter *exactly these words* within a *very specific speech situation*.³ This commitment on Cavell's part has evident affinities with any dramatist's commitment to, and with Shakespeare's genius for, getting exactly right the words that a genuinely human character within certain straits of circumstance, character, passion, and verbal talent would say when.⁴

That ordinary language must be both available as a vehicle for communication and for meaningful interaction among subjects, yet also open to change and never fully under the control of any individual subject, is a dominant theme of *The Claim of Reason*, especially of Chapter VII, "Excursus on Wittgenstein's Vision of Language." Language must be, as Cavell puts it there, both stable enough to permit successful communicative and expressive use *and* tolerant of change. Nothing—no putative universal or fixed convention—can function as *the* meaning of a word, such that if one just knew *that* exact entity or fixed fact associated with the word, then one could be absolutely assured of the conditions of its correct application and so immunized against even the possibility of making a mistake. Or as Cavell picks up the thought in *Disowning Knowledge*:

words recur in foretellable contexts; there could be no words otherwise; and no intentions otherwise, none beyond the, let me say, natural expression of instinct; nothing would be an expression of desire, or ambition, or the making of a promise, or the acceptance of a prophecy. Unpredictable recurrence is not a sign of language's ambiguity but is a fact of language as such, that there are words (DK, 231-32).

This ontological fact about language—that it is both stable and tolerant, and that linguistic meaning depends on nothing more or less than human subjects continuing well enough and intelligibly enough to invest their recognitions, interests, and passions in what is mostly ordinarily done with words, even while change in usage is

3. On the role of Freud's work in shaping Cavell's thinking about specific uses of language and how to hear their many often multivalent and conflicting meanings, see Richard Eldridge, "Criticism and the Risk of the Self: Stanley Cavell's Modernism and Elizabeth Bishop's," in *Stanley Cavell: Philosophy, Literature and Criticism*, eds. James Loxley and Andrew Taylor (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2011), 92-105.

4. Stephen Greenblatt powerfully describes the development of what he calls Shakespeare's "new technique of radical excision" enabling "an intense representation of inwardness" in his essay "The Death of Hamnet and the Making of Hamlet," *The New York Review of Books* (October 21, 2004), <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/2004/10/21/the-death-of-hamnet-and-the-making-of-hamlet>.

possible—then has immediate consequences for the life of human subjects as such. One becomes a distinctively human subject—or enters into the role of a discursive, deliberating, reflective, subject, as opposed to being simply an empirically identifiable biological human being—over time, through training, by imitatively taking up the possibilities of communication and expression that come to dawn on the infant as manifest in the behaviors of grownups. Grownups being what they are, and relations with them on the part of infants being what they are, the development of a sense of what it is correct to say when is bound up with conflicting demands made on the infant and with the infant's desperate wish to please parents and others who make these conflicting demands. Adventure and a sense of dawning cognitive, communicative, and expressive power are crossed for the infant with anxiety and frustration, as an ego develops caught between libidinal impulses and superego commands and prohibitions that are internalizations of the demands of others.⁵

One natural reaction to the agon of entry into language and into the life of a human subject is a wish to know absolutely and to have absolute control of the condi-

5. For an excellent survey of subject development that brings together Cavell's work on language with Freud's developmental psychology, see Marcia Cavell, *Becoming a Subject: Reflections in Philosophy and Psychoanalysis* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008). A second dramatic picture of subject development as it occurs through learning language within a field of contestation and accommodation occurs in R. G. Collingwood's Hegel- and Spinoza-inspired account of language learning in *The Principles of Art* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1938), 227-228, 239-240. Finally, compare Charles Petersen's very apt summary of Cavell's Freudian-inflected understanding of the stages of subject development: First, an ambition [Cavell] finds fundamental to the human condition: the desire to make the world more present, to experience the world even more directly, to know that another loves you, say, to the same degree that you love him. Second, since making the world more present becomes impossible, and we cannot know the love of another in the same way we know our love for that other, we arrive at the feeling of fraudulence (where others, since we can't confirm their love, can't confirm our love, so we doubt that even we do love), and skepticism (where others, since we can't confirm their existence, can't confirm our existence, so we doubt that we exist). Ever since Descartes first asked how he could be certain the world was not the work of a demon—the famous line of inquiry that led to modern skepticism—this problem has seemed little more than an intellectual exercise. Cavell makes skepticism fundamental, a relation to the world that comes not from the intellect but from (frustrated) desire. The third stage, then, is the attempt by philosophers (and writers of all kinds) to solve skepticism, to rid themselves of doubt and achieve certainty by abstracting the world, which Cavell interprets as a redoubling of skepticism—an attempt to again make the world more present not by acknowledging that frustrated first attempt but by ignoring it, or avenging it, “a kind of violence the human mind performs in response to its discovery of its limitation.” This is Cavell's diagnosis of logical positivism, the philosophy of his peers. Next follows the fourth stage, represented by the work of the ordinary language philosophers: an attempt to return to all that had been left behind through the abstraction of everyday life. But this return is radically altered by the initial run-in with skepticism, such that what had been ordinary becomes uncanny, and the philosophers of ordinary language, as it were, discover for the first time the ordinary, the everyday, all that had previously been taken for granted. They thus point the way, though without going far enough. After skepticism, Cavell writes, “the everyday is what we cannot but aspire to, since it appear [...] lost to us”; but the answer to skepticism is not a “philosophical construction,” not a treatise or a single technique, but the wholesale “reconstruction or resettlement of the everyday.” “Must We Mean What We Say?: On Stanley Cavell,” n+1, (11 February 2013), <https://nplusonemag.com/online-only/online-only/must-we-mean-what-we-say>.

tions of linguistic-discursive-judgmental performance and of the actions that follow from judgment. This wish is the source of philosophy's repeated and repeatedly frustrated attempts to make contact with absolute givens that determine correct judgment. Plato's talk of abstract forms, Aristotle's of forms immanent in nature, Aquinas's of divine Providence, Descartes's of clear and distinct perceptions, Hegel's of the Absolute, and Marx's of species-being are all ways of giving expression to this natural wish that remains unappeasable within the ambit of ordinary experience. They promise, but in fact fail to yield, understanding of and resonance with something as a source of absolute assurance and orientation in one's life as a subject. Alternatively one might accept one's complete powerlessness and ability to judge and act according to reason by embracing Humean skepticism and naturalism. Here one is promised freedom from responsibility for orientations and relationships, but with the implausible cost of being able to do nothing, as if all one's bodily motions and utterances were necessarily no more actively formed or alterable than is the turning green of leaves when chlorophyll production diminishes with falling temperatures.

Both these flawed strategies for coping with the agon of the inheritance of language are absolutist, in resting on an all-or-nothing assumption. Either we are, or can become, absolute masters, or we are absolute victims. But this all-or-nothing assumption is the very thought that should be rejected. We are, instead, always at stake and at risk in judgment and in action (even if sometimes the stakes are low and easily met). We cannot stand on self-enclosed, internalized intentions (formed either under contact with absolutes or passively under conventions); we always mean more in what we say and do than we can fully control, and we are always responsible for coming to reasonable enough terms with that fact. That we must mean what we say is both a description of commitments enacted in judgment and action that outrun our foresight *and* a normative demand to take responsibility for our commitments as best we can with our finite foresight and finite accomplished powers.⁶ "Intension [a mean-

6. Anthony J. Cascardi aptly notes that "The disclosure of our commitments in what we say, together with an account of what it means to honor or to skirt them, is as important as anything in Cavell's work. ...Cavell portrays his engagements with Shakespeare as unavoidable because it is Shakespeare who, above all writers, explores the full range of the commitments that language entails. The power of Shakespeare's work rests on his ability to envision characters who live out the fate of their words relentlessly, without compromise or escape, or who suffer disasterously from their failure to do so." ("Disowning Knowledge': Cavell on Shakespeare," in *Stanley Cavell*, ed. Richard Eldridge (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 190-205, at 190.

ing-entity grasped and enclosed within the subject] is not a substitute for intention [or what is always expressed and at stake in action],” as Cavell puts in in “Must We Mean What We Say?”⁷ we should reject the thought that “if intention counts for anything in meaning, it counts for everything” (DK, 240). Or, in a wonderful question that occurs in the collection *In Quest of the Ordinary*, “Is W. C. Fields our only alternative to Humpty Dumpty?”⁸ The standing fact of our lives with language as human subjects, as *Disowning Knowledge* puts it, is that

you always tell more and tell less than you know. Wittgenstein’s *Investigations* draws this most human predicament into philosophy, forever returning to philosophy’s ambivalence, let me call it, as between wanting to tell more than words can say and wanting to evade telling altogether—an ambivalence epitomized in the wish to speak “outside language games,” a wish for language to do, the mind to be) everything and nothing. Here I think again of Emerson’s wonderful saying in which he detects the breath of virtue and vice that our character “emits” at every moment, words so to speak always before and beyond themselves, essentially and unpredictably recurrent, say rhythmic, fuller of meaning than can be exhausted (DK, 201).

Within this most human predicament, character and one’s uses of language in judgments, together with the actions that express them, are each other’s obverse and reverse, each being and meaning what they are only in relation to each other. Burdened by multiple, conflicting demands, coming from other subjects, freighted with anxieties, and haunted by fantasies, yet in possession of some possibilities of agency and expression, our words—anyone’s words—must at some level reveal our complex lives as subjects.⁹

7. Cavell, “Must We Mean What We Say?,” in *Must We Mean What We Say?* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1969), 29.

8. Cavell, “Being Odd, Getting Even (Poe, Descartes, Emerson),” in Cavell, *In Quest of the Ordinary* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 117. The thought here, of course, is that there is some alternative open to us between Humpty Dumpty’s world- and other-denying claim to be absolute master of what words mean and W. C. Fields’s sullen, depressive, alcoholic resentfulness at the antics of children and café waitresses.

9. Cascardi registers this point in noting that “Cavell’s analyses of Shakespeare are rooted in a conviction that Shakespeare’s characters *must* mean what they say, and mean it thoroughly, unless of course they are in a posture of avoidance, in which case their words may reveal whatever it is they might wish to disown. It bears upon us as readers and critics of these plays to suppose this and nothing less.” (“Disowning Knowledge’: Cavell on Shakespeare, 193.)

This most human predicament is arguably felt to be more pressing in modernity, from say roughly the early 14th century in Italy (Petrarch) onwards, as emerging transportation networks, developing urbanization, and improved technologies of production (themselves all resting on skill development in pursuit of genuine human interests) begin to make less repetitively local and more diverse and skill-based social identities available.¹⁰ But it is also arguably an ontological predicament that attaches to human life with language as such, with economic scarcities and facts of coercive power sometimes acting to inhibit the emergence of a felt sense of this predicament. A sense of human life as open to exercises of creative power and conversion of interest is certainly evident as early as in the Platonic texts and in early Christianity, as well as in modernity.

For those caught within this predicament who have both a strong sense of it and possess substantial imaginative power and self-discipline, so that they might inaugurate new possibilities of life, there is a natural tendency to experience what Cavell elsewhere calls the uncanniness of the ordinary: a sense that

the everyday is ordinary because, after all, it is our habit, or habitat; but since that very inhabitation is from time to time perceptible to us—we who have constructed it—as extraordinary [sometimes in its decadence and resistance to full expressions of creative individuality]—, we conceive that some place elsewhere, or this place otherwise constructed, must be what is ordinary to us, must be what romantics—of course including both E.T. and Nicholas Nickleby’s alter ego Smike—call “home.”¹¹

10. Jay Bernstein dwells on Cavell’s perception that modernity is an age of subjectivity prominently foregrounded and individualized, but therein also prominently detached from love and community. Cavell’s “idea of saving ‘love for the world [until it is responsive again]’ is intended as a way of expressing, at least, that love of the world is no longer possible because the world is no longer lovable, [...] and hence that our attachment to life, however fierce and insistent, is smaller, meaner, narrower. [...] [Cavell’s claim is] that love, or what we think of as love, and subjectivity as we have inherited it from the exemplary instances of Hamlet and Descartes, are all but incommensurable. [...] *Hamlet* begins, and so modernity begins, with the loss of the king-father and the queen-mother, that is, not only with the loss of the ideal god-like father and goddess-like mother, but thereby with the loss of father and mother as the (representative) sources of ideality, sources of meaningful order.” (“How Tragedy Ends,” in *Stanley Cavell: Philosophy, Literature, and Criticism*, 106-122, at 106, 108, citing Cavell, “A Matter of Meaning It,” in Cavell, *Must We Mean What We Say?*, 213-237, at 229.)

11. Cavell, “The Philosopher in American Life,” in Cavell, *In Quest of the Ordinary*, 9.

Within the grip of this sense, there is then for those with visionary power a standing tendency to deny the significance of the fallen ordinary as it stands in favor of the pursuit of a reformed, different, more meaningful ordinary. Both the skeptic's repudiations of ordinary knowledge and the systematizing philosopher's turn to a world of forms or the will of God or a world of absolutized mathematical physics are disciplined efforts to deny the significance of the ordinary.

The systematizing philosopher's efforts at radically new intelligibility founder, however,¹² and there is, by Cavell's lights, no intellectual way out of this condition: the truth of skepticism—its correct perception that meaningfulness is not as fully present and lived as it is felt it ought to be; its “expression of an awareness that presentness was threatened, gone” (DK, 95)—is “that while criteria provide conditions of (shared) speech, they do not provide an answer to skeptical doubt” (DK, 205-6). From within either the skeptical or the systematizing impulse,¹³ “acknowledging that the world exists, that you know for yourself that it is yours, is not so clear a process” (DK, 203). Skepticism—more honestly and directly so than its systematizing double and rival—is “an intellectualization of some prior intimation” of lost or absent meaningfulness (DK, 206). It is “an expression of the human wish to escape the bounds or bonds of the human, if not from above then from below, [...] the human craving for, and horror of, the inhuman, of limitlessness, of monstrousness” (DK 229). It is “a power that all who possess language possess and may desire: to dissociate oneself, excommunicate oneself from the community, in whose agreement, mutual attunement, words exist,” for the sake of a better one, or, failing that, for the sake of intactness, privacy, and (fantasized) invulnerability. Sceptics at times are we all.

Shakespearean tragedy is then “an interpretation of what skepticism is an interpretation of”: our human predicament, that we live within “the human fatedness to

12. In Eldridge, “Leading a Human Life: Wittgenstein, Intentionality, and Romanticism,” I trace, following Cavell, the continual surging forth of this effort and its foundering in *Philosophical Investigations*.

13. Cascardi notes correctly that “Cavell's work is to dismantle the opposition between skepticism and epistemology, rather than to oppose skepticism by proposing an alternative to epistemology. ...In Cavell's readings, Shakespearean tragedy and romance are interpreted as presenting openings into the problems of skepticism and knowledge that lie beyond, or beneath, what philosophy conventionally imagines to be at stake in them. [...] Shakespeare's texts ask us to take account of the full measure of what skepticism means and thereby challenge us to confront those things for which epistemology has come to be a cover. [...] What epistemology *avoids* must be something that 'knowing' cannot provide. Indeed, knowing serves as the excuse, the cover, or the alibi for what ought to be acknowledged.” (“Disowning Knowledge”: Cavell on Shakespeare,” pp. 191, 192, 194.

significance, [...] victims of intelligibility,” both its fact and its limits. (DK 5, 95).¹⁴ Hence Cavell’s character criticism is not an impressionistic encounter with singular eccentricities or, as it were, denizens of possible worlds. It is instead a criticism of human character, fated always to partial significance, as it appears within an individual within a particular set of highly straitened circumstances, ambitions, power, and desire. Lear’s skeptical impulse is toward withdrawal and hiddenness, an “attempt to avoid recognition, the shame of exposure, the threat of self-revelation” (DK, 58). Coriolanus’s takes the form of “disgust with the world, [...] a vision of communication as contamination, the discovery that human existence is inherently undistinguished” (DK, 12). Macbeth’s seeks “deeds done in the doing without consequence, when surcease is success, [in name of] a wish for there to be no human action, no separation of consequence from intention, no gratification of desire, no showing of one’s hand in what happens [...]—a wish to escape the human” (DK, 233). Othello’s takes the form of murderous jealousy driven by a wish to preserve his in-tactness, apartness, and invulnerability to the claims of ordinary love.

Happily, however, we are not fully fated to follow these figures in their shames, disgusts, and murderous rages. In his sunniest book, *Pursuits of Happiness*, Cavell describes how some couples, through a combination of luck, wit, readiness to have fun, and acceptance of chastenings, may “trace the progress from narcissism and incestuous privacy to objectivity and the acknowledgment of otherness as the path and goal of human happiness.”¹⁵ Skills in managing this progress, are, however, fragile, and we live “between avoidance and acknowledgment,” and so open to being caught to various degrees within both the tragic skepticisms of Lear, Coriolanus, Macbeth, and Othello and the happinesses in joint purposiveness of Cary Grant and Katherine Hepburn, Cary Grant and Irene Dunne, and Clark Gable and Claudette Colbert. This betweenness—our human predicament, our fatedness to (limited) intelligibility and to

14. This should not rule out the further thoughts that men and women, say, or the masculine and the feminine, may experience this fatedness differently. As Cascardi puts it, “The idea, not inconsistent with some feminisms, is that men are rather less certain than women of their bodily existence and continuity with others, and in the face of those uncertainties are drawn to what the world has come to call ‘heroism,’ ‘achievement,’ or ‘originality.’” (“Disowning Knowledge’: Cavell on Shakespeare,” p. 199. It is surely no accident that Shakespeare’s tragic protagonists are (all but) all men.

15. Cavell, *Pursuits of Happiness: Hollywood Comedy of Remarriage* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981), p. 102. Derek Gottlieb, in *Skepticism and Belonging in Shakespeare’s Comedies* (London: Routledge, 2016) follows out this thought in taking Cavell’s work in *Pursuits of Happiness* to provide a lens for re-reading Shakespeare’s major comedies, themselves a major inspiration (by way of Northrop Frye) for Cavell’s comedy of remarriage book.

fantasies of overcoming or escaping it—then entails its continual expression in our lives and its continual expression and rescruinizing in the art that engages with our lives. “Apart from the wish for selfhood,” as always to be more fitly achieved, Cavell writes, “hence the always simultaneous granting of otherness, I do not understand the value of art. Apart from this wish and its achievement, art is exhibition.”¹⁶ *Disowning Knowledge* is Cavell’s account of Shakespeare’s art, and its tracking major forms of the accomplishment of selfhood under the tragic but all too human conditions of domination by a wish for absolute orientation, assurance, and control.

16. Cavell, *The World Viewed*, enlarged edn. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1979), 22.