

3. Existence, Contingency and Mourning in Cavell's *Hamlet*

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Shakespeare's *Hamlet* has fascinated philosophers, from Hegel to Nietzsche, from Benjamin to Carl Schmitt, and more recently taken up in French thought by Derrida and Deleuze. It is the play that Freud sets as the modern correlate of his interpretation of Oedipus. Cavell's short essay 'Hamlet's Burden of Proof' is far less discussed than his other readings of Shakespeare's plays such as 'The Avoidance of Love in *King Lear*' and "Othello or the Stake of the Other." It centers on the implications to be drawn from the play within the play, performed "to catch the conscience of the King."

1. Play and Fantasy

The first important thing to remark about the play within the play is that it is performed twice, once as a dumb show and once with words. The interpretative problem arising from this repetition is that the king does not react with recognition to the dumb show. Several possible explanations may be ruled out: It is not proof that the King did not murder his brother, since he confesses to it in the church scene. Nor is the King merely distracted or hiding his feelings. So, the lack of recognition turns on the fact that the King did not murder *in the way* that is shown in the dumb show. Since Hamlet is the one who 'directed' the players, this further means that there is something in the play which is the expression of how Hamlet *imagines* the murder of his father to have taken place.

This raises for Cavell the question of what sort of fantasy is being played out by Hamlet's stage directions. Some features of the setting of the play suggest an answer. First, and foremost there is the obscene character of Hamlet's remarks and 'commen-

tary' (while 'interpreting' the play for the king), which is evident in the way he speaks to Ophelia ("I could interpret between you and your love if I could see the puppets dallying").¹ This suggests that precisely something obscene, something that ought to remain behind the scenes is played out and exhibited as Hamlet's 'fantasy' of the murder. We know that the play within the play aims to catch the conscience of the King, but also that it is to test the veracity of the ghost. Or put differently, the King's reaction would serve as a test whether the ghost is real or a figment of Hamlet's imagination. But the sexual character of Hamlet's remarks introduces another figure who becomes central to the laying out of the fantasy, namely Gertrude, Hamlet's mother. Cavell notes how Hamlet speaks of chasing from his imagination foul pictures of Claudius as lover of his mother. But maybe even these are screens for a more fundamental fantasy.

As Cavell draws the connection between this obscene character and the play within the play, he turns to the psychoanalytic conception of the most fundamental fantasy in the constitution of the individual, as it were a fantasy of origins, which following Freud he calls the '*primal scene*': "[I am] proposing to look at the dumb show as Hamlet's invention, let me say his fantasy, and in particular a fantasy that deciphers into the memory of a primal scene, a scene of parental intercourse."² In other words, if the play within the play enacts the primal scene, then the main figures are not so much Hamlet's father and his brother Claudius, but rather Hamlet's father and Queen Gertrude, his mother. Cavell quotes Laplanche and Pontalis, who developed after Freud this concept of the primal fantasy: "whatever appears to the subject as something needing an explanation or theory is dramatized as a moment of emergence, the beginning of a history." And he adds: "Laplanche and Pontalis specify the primary fantasies as of "the origin of the individual, of the upsurge of sexuality, and of the difference between the sexes" in sum "of the origin of the subject himself."³ The primal scene specifically concerns the first of these fantasies, namely the origin of the individual (of the subject as individual).

1. William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, ed. J. D. Wilson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), III, ii, 245-46.

2. Cavell, *Disowning Knowledge in Six Plays of Shakespeare* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 182-83. All references to Cavell's essay 'Hamlet's Burden of Proof' in *Disowning Knowledge in Seven Plays of Shakespeare* are abbreviated as *DK* followed by page numbers.

3. *Ibid.*, 187.

For sure, the staging of the primal fantasy involves certain distortions that hide its true nature, not unlike the kind of reversals that Freud suggests in his discussion of the case of the primal scene of the wolf-man. First, a reversal of gender (the figure supposed to represent Claudius stands for Gertrude in the fantasy). Secondly, a reversal of active and passive: not pouring something into the ear of the father but having something poured into her — the fantasy of intercourse. At first this might sound merely perverse, but recall that the paradigmatic ancient tragedy precisely has to do with the question of incest and murder in the triangular relation of father, mother and son. It is of course important to reflect both on the connection to the Oedipal triangle and on the difference of modern tragedy from ancient tragedy, that is on the way Shakespeare takes on himself the inheritance of the tragic form and the transformation of the primal scene.

An important connection between the primal scene and the form of the tragic is suggested in aligning the former with the character of the mythical: “Like myths, they [these primal fantasies] claim to provide a representation of, and a solution to, the major enigmas which confront the child.”⁴

Before further commenting on Cavell’s complex account, I would like to make a short detour through the question of myth and tragedy in antiquity as well as the transformation of their relation in modernity.

2. Myth and Tragedy

I will briefly develop the relation between myth and tragedy initially by way of Walter Benjamin’s account of the tragic in the first part of his book *The Origin of German Tragedy*. As he describes it, tragedy is closely bound to myth or legend, which the performance periodically reshapes. In performing that legend, the community, through its heroic representative, recognizes anew its historical destiny. The dramatic performance is the medium that gathers a community and imparts a fundamental orientation to its existence.

This orientation can further be characterized as the overcoming of the condition of fate, or of a burden of guilt pertaining to unformed life. By gathering and con-

4. Ibid., 186-87.

concentrating fate in his person, the tragic hero reveals the contradiction that underlies collective existence. Tragedy ‘concentrates’ fate and ‘reflects’ it in the person of the hero so that this very reflection is the arrest of fate’s pernicious ambiguity. Tragedy transforms a space ruled by demonic ambiguity into one in which decisive measures can be taken. It involves a *decisive* moment. The state in which, through his terrible suffering, all possibilities end for the tragic hero shows, concentrated in his person, the paradoxical condition of existence of the community. It allows the community to envisage the order that will be raised beyond the violence of unformed life. Thus, Benjamin writes: “[the tragic sacrifice] is the representative action, in which new circumstances in the life of the people are announced.”⁵

For Benjamin, the concentration of guilt in the person of the tragic hero is key to recognizing the redeeming character of tragedy, its way of addressing the ‘natural guilt’ that is part of the very existence in the field of life. The tragic hero makes the contradiction of a form of life visible but does not resolve it in speech. His position is characterized by silence. The tragic hero’s silence is correlative with the rejection of the community of the present, and it calls for a future community that will make this yet-unexpressed word heard. It is a silence that Benjamin therefore identifies with the muteness of infancy, of that which does not yet know how to speak what he shows in his own person.

The word belongs to community to come. For the hero, the arrest of ambiguity in mute defiance is his recognition of an inalienable core of solitary existence. The tragic is at the same time a trial of the Olympians by humanity. It marks the emergence of the infinity of morality in which man senses, without being able to express in any other way than defiance, that he is “better than is god.” This, for Benjamin, is the “birth of genius in moral speechlessness.”⁶

Now, the important question for Benjamin, as well as for Cavell, is what elements of the tragic are retained and how are they transformed in modern Shakespearean tragedy. Specifically, how does this transformation manifest itself in *Hamlet*. Can we still read *Hamlet* according to this paradigm of Greek tragedy, and in what way can the

5. Walter Benjamin, *Origin of the German Trauerspiel*, trans. H. Eiland (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2019), 100.

6. Benjamin, *Selected Writings of Walter Benjamin*, vol. 1, ed. M. Bullock and M. W. Jennings (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1996), 203.

recasting of the myth serve the unity of the community in the face of the historically specific circumstances of its present? Carl Schmitt's *Hamlet or Hecuba: The Intrusion of History into Play* is precisely an attempt to read *Hamlet* along those lines.⁷

The title of Schmitt's book suggests the fundamental contrast he wishes to establish between play and the tragic. The reference to Hecuba alludes to the first interaction of Hamlet with the actors, when they show their talent by playing for him the scene of Hecuba weeping over the death of her husband Priam. This *mere* play, reflected in the 'turning on and off' at will of pathos, is contrasted to the seriousness of the tragic, measured by the way in which tragedy is capable of showing through its constitutive myth, the present historical situation in its most decisive features. In other words, *Hamlet* must be understood, according to Schmitt, as the tragic reworking of a legend for the present of Shakespeare's England. That present decisively illuminated by the tragic myth is that of King James, whose father, Lord Darnley, was murdered and whose mother, Mary Queen of the Scots, remarried with one suspected of the murder.

How is this reading affecting our understanding of the 'play within the play' in *Hamlet*? According to Schmitt, the 'Mousetrap' must contain a kernel of the myth as well as a reference to the utterly serious concrete historical situation addressed by *Hamlet*. As Schmitt writes, "the play within the play in Act Three of *Hamlet* is not only no look behind the scenes, but, on the contrary, it is the real play itself repeated *before* the curtains. This presupposes a realistic core of the most intense contemporary significance and timeliness. Otherwise the doubling would simply make the play more playful, more unlikely and artificial – more untrue as a play, until finally it would become a "parody of itself." Only a strong core of reality could stand up the double exposure of the stage upon the stage. It is possible to have a play within a play, but not a tragedy within a tragedy. The play within the play in Act Three is thus a consummate test of the hypothesis that a core of historical actuality and historical presence – the murder of the father of Hamlet – James and the marriage of the mother to the murderer – has the power to intensify the play as play without destroying the sense of the tragic."⁸

7. For a thought provoking analysis of Cavell's reading of *Hamlet* in relation to Benjamin and Schmitt, see Tatjana Jukić, "Cavell's Shakespeare, or the Insufficiency of Tragedy for Modernity," *Bollettino Filosofico* 32 (2017).

8. Carl Schmitt, *Hamlet or Hecuba: The Irruption of History into Play*, trans. D. Pan and J. Rust (Candor, NY: Telos Press, 2009), 43-44.

It is in many ways surprising to find Schmitt taking up the figure of Hamlet. For Hamlet appears to be precisely the polar opposite of the figure of the sovereign whose highest virtue is the decision in the state of emergency. Hamlet is utterly incapable of being decisive. Indeed, Schmitt refers to the ‘Hamletization’ of the sovereign that would result from the attempt to construe the urgency of decision merely upon the events of the present. It is precisely this insufficiency of the contingent that requires the recognition of the organizing character of myth in putting the present in the sharpest light. Tragedy is what can hold both the primal past of myth and the present situation so as to eventuate in a decision. Tragedy is therefore not mere play but borders on the seriousness of history. The problem of Schmitt is how to relate Hamlet on the one hand to the utmost actuality of the historical situation of Shakespeare’s time, and on the other hand to the primal or original ground that fills this situation with the highest significance, the ground of myth.⁹

3. Haunting and Play-Acting

These last considerations bring us back to the specificity of Cavell’s reading. On the face of it, Cavell also turns to the idea of a mythical core that gives the play within a play its true meaning. But we should note initially two fundamental differences between the way the primal scene functions in Cavell’s interpretation and how myth is, according to Schmitt, the tragic kernel of Hamlet. In the first place, the primal or mythical is identified in the constitution of the subject (not the historical community). Indeed, what is at play in the primal fantasy is precisely what one might

9. Schmitt laments how the rhetoric of play has overcome the modern conception of the work of art. He relates this legacy to Friedrich Schiller’s elaboration of the play drive in his *On the Aesthetic Education of Man*, trans. Keith Tribe (London: Penguin, 2016), itself taking up Kant’s account of aesthetic judgment in terms of the free play of the faculties in the “Third Critique.” (A related attack on the concept of the play in aesthetics and politics can be found in Schmitt’s *Political Romanticism*, trans. G. Oakes, Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1986). Schmitt understands the aesthetics of play as the conception that art creates an autonomous sphere apart from the struggles and seriousness of authentic historical life, through which humanity can be seemingly fulfilled. In his view: “Art for [Schiller] is a realm of autonomous representation. Only in play does one become human, does one transcend self-alienation and find true dignity. In such philosophy play must become superior to seriousness. Life is serious, and art is jovial; indeed, but the serious reality of the man of action is the ultimately only “miserable reality,” and seriousness is always on the verge of becoming an animal brutality.” (Schmitt, *Hamlet or Hecuba*, 47). This ideology of play leads, according to Schmitt, to the dissociation of art from history.

call facing the contingency of one's individual existence: "Now I propose, prompted by Hamlet, to take the fantasy of this origin to be represented by the question: Why of all the ones I might have been am I just this one and no other, given this world and no other, possessed of exactly this mother and this father?"¹⁰

Secondly, it is a fantasy that more than anything shows what is *to be faced* in achieving one's concrete historical individuality. It is not what immediately determines the unity of significance. The fantasy, one might say, expresses the burden against which the proof of one's existence is to be enacted. To clarify, consider the way Cavell relates the fantasy and the burden that is laid on Hamlet to avenge his father. In the triangular relation enacted, we recognize not just the demand to avenge the murder: "The ghost asks initially for revenge for his murder, a task the son evidently accepts as his to perform [...]. But after telling his story of death, what the Ghost asks Hamlet 'not to bear' is something distinctly different — that 'the royal bed of Denmark be/ a couch for luxury and damned incest.' But is this the son's business not to bear?"¹¹

In other words, the son is tasked with acting in the face of the impotence of his father. Hamlet the father appears as a ghost, and in that sense is structurally speaking impotent since he cannot act in the world of the living. But the impotence that Hamlet must remedy is of another kind. It is played out in the primal fantasy of his own origins and to be set out not against the threat of castration of the father, but against the sense of the annihilating power of the mother. We do not have here the Oedipal triangle in which the child is threatened by the father to renounce his narcissistic attachment to the mother. Rather, the mother is the one who annihilates the father and the son is hopelessly attempting to act in the face of the father's impotence: "What I claim is rather that Hamlet feels [Gertrude's] power as annihilating of his own [...]. Moreover, my claim is that Hamlet divines that his father experienced Gertrude's annihilating power before him."¹² The play stages a man collapsing upon something being poured into him: this is a reversal of intercourse, which retains the idea of the collapse of the father.

If we take Hamlet to share the kind of impotence of his father which he fantasized in the play within the play, it must be reflected in his own existence. Cavell's

10. Cavell, *DK*, 187.

11. *Ibid.*, 188.

12. *Ibid.*, 185.

reading in effect reinterprets one of the most famous characteristics of Hamlet, namely his incapacity to act. But it receives a completely different meaning in terms of the primal fantasy. If it is a fantasy of origin, then, assuming this impotence would mean that Hamlet refuses to be born, he refuses to enter life. His identification with the impotence of the father can be described therefore as a sense of himself haunting the world: “His bar — his lack of ‘advancement’ into the world — is expressed in one’s sense (my sense) of him as the Ghost of the play that bears his and his father’s name, a sense that his refusal of participation in the world is his haunting of the world.”¹³

This brings out a further dimension of the play within the play. Hamlet stages his own fantasy, that is, he conceives of himself as an actor, an actor in his own play. Added then, or related to the idea of haunting the world is another characterization of what not *really* acting in the world comes to: it is to play-act. Haunting the world is behaving “as if he is a figure in a play.” So that the setting of a play within a play is for Hamlet yet another way of expressing his being in the world as an actor rather than an agent. Indeed, this would suggest that Cavell further reinterprets through this scene one of the recurring questions about Hamlet, whether he is truly mad or play acting. One could say that his madness is not something that should be identified solely in terms of the bouts of what seems to his surrounding as incoherence. But nor is he merely play-acting being mad. If anything, his madness is in assuming in his life the position of an actor.

4. Repetition and Enacting Existence

What would it be to conceive of *Hamlet* as offering not just the vision of the curse but also articulating the character of what it is to redeem existence in these conditions?

13. Cavell, *DK*, 188. One should conceive of this idea of haunting as a figure of refusing to be born into the world as a characteristic of modern tragedy. Indeed, there are no ghosts in ancient tragedy. For sure, it constitutes a variation on the words of the chorus in *Oedipus at Colonus*: “Not to be born is best / when all is reckoned in, but once a man has seen the light / the next best thing, by far, is to go back / where he came from” (1388-91) In modern tragedy haunting is expressing the refusal of entering the world. (Compare to Cavell’s reading of Coleridge’s “Ballad of the Ancient Mariner,” in *In Quest of the Ordinary: Lines of Skepticism and Romanticism*, Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1988, chapter 2).

And would that manifest itself as a passage to “real” action? One must take into account the kinds of reversal we find between the active and the passive throughout the play, starting from the reversal of the usual figuration of the feminine as passive and the masculine as active (in the fantasy of the primal scene). This reversal must also characterize the character of the solution. In other words, it is not an overcoming of the passivity of impotence by decisive action, or the emergence from the space of play into ‘real’ life that is at issue. One must conceive of the work internal to passivity as the transformation of play-acting into what Cavell calls ‘*enacting*’ one’s existence.¹⁴

If acting becomes enacting, then the idea of play would be itself split between what we might call mere play (more or less corresponding to Schmitt’s conception) and the enacting of one’s existence for which theater serves as a model. If passivity must be transformed, it would be by turning mere impotence into work: the work of suffering, of passivity is not action but mourning. It is these two aspects that are foreclosed by Hamlet’s acting out the primal fantasy: “It is the bequest of a beloved father that deprives the son of his identity, of enacting his own existence — it curses, as if spitefully, his being born of this father. Put otherwise, the father’s dictation of the way he wishes to be remembered — by having his revenge taken for him — exactly deprives the son, with his powers of mourning, of the right to mourn *him*, to let him pass.”¹⁵

What would it be to ‘enact’ existence rather than refuse birth? This question leads to a further important theme in Cavell’s essay, namely the traumatic character of existence and the deferred character of the trauma. Recall that the primal fantasy is not an event that has been witnessed but rather it is constructed “deferred, read back (*nachträglich*)”¹⁶ as an account of what one could not have witnessed — one’s own coming to existence. This duality and the structure of deferment is characteristic of Freud’s account of trauma in general. Freud famously begins by seeking a real event of sexual abuse underlying hysteria. He then suggests that it is the witnessing of parental intercourse that is something like a traumatic irruption of sexuality into the mind of the child unable to grasp it, something whose meaning is given retroactively.

14. For an insightful discussion of the idea of enacting in the context of the broader context of commitment, witnessing and performative utterance, see David Rudrum, “The Action to the Word, The Word to Action: Reading Hamlet with Cavell and Derrida,” *Angelaki* 21, no. 2 (2016). Rudrum brings out how Derrida’s reflections on Hamlet that elaborate on his critique of the performative in Austin converge with Cavell’s reading of the play.

15. Cavell, *DK*, 187.

16. *Ibid.*, 187.

But this too need not be taken as a real event. Rather, Freud conceives of the retroactive formation of a primal *fantasy* as what answers to the questionable emergence of a human subject into existence.

At issue then is the precise difference between merely being caught in that fantasy (as it were acting it out repeatedly), and the repetition that would count as *enacting* one's existence. Cavell clarifies the dual structure of enacting existence in philosophy by reference to Emerson's recasting of Descartes' *cogito*: "In philosophy I take it to have been expressed in Descartes, a point perfectly understood and deeply elaborated by Emerson, that to exist the human being has the burden of proving that he or she exists, and that this burden is discharged in thinking your existence, which comes in Descartes (though this is controversial) to finding how to say, 'I am, I exist'; not of course to say it just once, but at every instant of your existence; to preserve your existence, originate it. To exist is to take your existence upon you to enact it, as if the basis of human existence is theater, even melodrama. To refuse this burden is to condemn yourself to skepticism — to a denial of the existence, hence of the value, of the world."¹⁷

Hamlet's famous monologue is reinterpreted by Cavell in these terms. "To be or not to be" is not a question of whether or not to stay alive or end his life (like Ophelia). It is the question of the affirmation of one's concrete existence in the face of the impotence and annihilating power played out in the original fantasy that blocks one's being (re)born into the world as the concrete existing individual one is: "On this deciphering of the dumb show as primal scene — enciphering young Hamlet's delayed sense of Gertrude's power to annihilate all Hamlet's — I see Hamlet's question whether to be or not to be, as asking first of all not why he stays alive, but first of all how he or anyone lets himself be born as the one he is."¹⁸ The primal fantasy imagines what led to one's birth and also retroactively how it is that I am the one I am.

In reflecting further on the nature of 'enacting' one's existence, we can recognize another important feature of the play within a play. As Cavell argues, a play with-

17. *Ibid.*, 187. Cavell suggests other political and religious contexts that share this same fundamental form (an original state and the necessity of reaffirming one's relation to that origin): "As if human birth, the birth of the human, proposes the question of birth. That human existence has two stages — call these birth and the acceptance of birth — is expressed in religion as baptism, in politics as consent." (*Ibid.*, 187).

18. *Ibid.*, 187.

in a play is also for Shakespeare an occasion to reflect on the power of theater as such. Cavell's interpretation provides a further reading of the duality of pantomime and words. Indeed, the fact that the play within a play has itself a dual structure is reflecting the dual character of enacting existence. It would be as if the pantomime, a scene which is without words, is that fantasy which must be recognized and enacted in meaning, with words. It is that whose meaning is to be retroactively determined by the scene played out in words. Indeed, it suggests that part of the question is that of the relation of action, or drama, to its articulated meaning, which might follow, or even be retroactively determined. We must think here of the relation between showing, which is something that has to do with the dramatic action, and saying, namely recognizing the meaning of the action: "I assume the discussion of theater proposed by [the repetitive dumb show] is of the relation or argument in theater between the eye and the ear, between representation by action and by words, showing and saying."¹⁹

The idea of a deferred recognition of the meaning of an action characterizes the form of ancient tragedy. Indeed, one cannot conceive of the actions of Oedipus as having their meaning through the conscious intention he has in committing them. It is only retrospectively that Oedipus recognizes his actions as having killed his father and conceived children with his mother. One could say that this is what tragic irony comes to, in which there is much more meaning to articulate in an action than the hero can encompass (until the moment of recognition).

We have discussed this moment in laying out briefly Benjamin's idea of the concentration of fate and its expression through the catastrophe that befalls the tragic hero. But there would still be an important difference between the moment of recognition and the incorporation of fate in ancient tragedy. Even the failure of the play within the play points to that: the King does not recognize his actions in the pantomime and his reaction to the play with words is not what Hamlet has in mind as constituting a decisive proof. For Hamlet's additional 'commentary' and interpretation during the performance amounts practically to a direct accusation. No wonder the King would react to *that!* So that we can say that there is no moment of closure of

19. Ibid., 181. For an analysis of Cavell's understanding of the therapeutic force of tragedy specifically in the context of *Hamlet*, see William Franke, "Acknowledging Unknowing: Stanley Cavell and the Philosophical Criticism of Literature," *Philosophy and Literature* 39, no. 1 (2015).

meaning, no moment of recognition in Hamlet. There is no paradoxical concentration of fate in the figure of a hero that arrests the tragic irony. What then is the form of meaning that enacts existence in the face of the primal fantasy? In order to answer this last question, it is necessary to bring out a further important aspect of modern tragedy, namely the irreducible contingency inherent to the existence depicted in it.

5. Mourning and the Contingency of Existence

Recall that the question that is played out in the primal fantasy is why I am this specific individual with these specific parents, born into this world. This radical contingency of existence is a further distinguishing trait between ancient and modern tragedy. Indeed, with ancient tragedy, the hero is an exemplary individual and everything in his existence receives its meaning out of the necessary outcome, out of the limit of death. But, as Hegel has pointed out in his *Lectures on Fine Art*, contingency rules everywhere in *Hamlet*: “the tragic denouement is also displayed as purely the effect of unfortunate circumstances and external accidents which might have turned out otherwise and produced a happy ending. In this case the sole spectacle offered to us is that the modern individual with the non-universal nature of his character, his circumstances, and the complications in which he is involved, is necessarily surrendered to the fragility of all that is mundane and must endure the fate of finitude. But this mere affliction is empty, and, in particular, we are confronted by a purely horrible external necessity when we see fine minds, noble in themselves, perishing in such a barrel against the misfortune of entirely external circumstances. Such a history may touch us acutely, and yet it seems only dreadful and we feel a pressing demand for a necessary correspondence between the external circumstances and what the inner nature of these fine characters really is. It is only from this point of view that we can feel ourselves reconciled in e.g. the fate of Hamlet or Juliet. Looked at from outside, Hamlet’s death seems brought about accidentally owing to the fight with Laertes and the exchange of rapiers. But death lay from the beginning in the background of Hamlet’s mind. The sands of time do not content him. In his melancholy and weakness, his worry, his disgust at all the affairs of life, we sense from the start that in all his

terrible surroundings he is a lost man, almost consumed already by inner disgust before death comes to him from outside.”²⁰

This is to say that the form of necessity internal to ancient tragedy, in which life is as it were gathered and one’s identity determined through the catastrophic recognition, is unavailable to the modern form in which contingency rules. Appealing to a primal fantasy to unify that utter contingency is, as we saw, being cursed with haunting the world. But altogether giving up on that dimension of fantasy is just as destructive.

Cavell clarifies what the refusal of fantasy would come to. It is the death of the world, that is the curse of seeing into people, call it the skeletal character of Hamlet’s sense of the world. This is expressed by his famous line, “I know not seems.” It is also Cavell’s interpretation of the grave diggers scene. Not a reflection on the transience of existence, but rather the predicament of one who has foregone the ‘veil’ of fantasy: “Hamlet is making claim to, or laying hold of, a power of perception that curses him, as Cassandra’s cursed her, one that makes him unable to stop at seems, a fate to know nothing but what people are, nothing but the truth of them. His later staring at the skull would accordingly be the occasion not, as traditionally imagined of some special more moment of remembering and meditation, but an emblem of the everyday, skeletal manner in which human beings present themselves to him.”²¹ Seeing the deadness of the world is a condition in which the world cannot involve you. There emerges a world devoid of hope for the serious realization of any higher purpose. It is the world of Hamlet’s melancholy.

20. Georg Wilhelm Friedrich, *Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Arts*, trans. T. M. Knox (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 1231-32.

21. Cavell, *DK*, 186. This is in effect Nietzsche’s understanding of Hamlet’s incapacity to act. He has seen “too deeply into the nature of things.” “For the rapture of the Dionysian state with its annihilation of the ordinary bounds and limits of existence contains, while it lasts, a lethargic element in which all personal experiences of the past become immersed. This chasm of oblivion separates the worlds of everyday reality and of Dionysian reality. But as soon as this everyday reality re-enters consciousness, it is experienced as such, with nausea: an ascetic, will negating mood is the fruit of these states. In this sense the Dionysian man resembles Hamlet: both have once looked truly into the essence of things, they have gained knowledge, and nausea inhibits action; for their action could not change anything in the eternal nature of things; they feel it to be ridiculous or humiliating that they should be asked to set right a world that is out of joint. Knowledge kills action; *action requires the veils of illusion*: that is the doctrine of Hamlet, not that cheap wisdom of the Jack the Dreamer who reflects too much and, as it were, from an excess of possibilities does not get around to action. Not reflection, no true knowledge, an insight into the horrible truth, outweighs any motive for action, both in Hamlet and in the Dionysian man.” (Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy and The Case of Wagner*, trans. W. Kaufmann, New York, NY: Vintage Books, 2010, 59-60, my emphasis).

Melancholy, after Freud, is to be contrasted with the work of mourning. The refusal to be born into existence is the incapacity to mourn.²² But mourning is also to be characterized as a form of meaning that is correlative with recognizing the concreteness of one's life. It would be understanding the work of concrete individuation as a work of mourning. "Hence the play interprets the taking of one's place in the world as a process of mourning, as if there is a taking up of the world that is humanly a question of giving it up."²³

What is it that makes mourning the work of contingency? As Freud puts it, it would be the release of one's attachments, as it were one by one. Death as a limit is not incorporated into life as the recognition of a moment of closure to which all living ambiguity leads. The contrast between the concentration of fate on the figure of the hero in ancient tragedy, and the kind of multiplicity that is inherent to the 'completeness' of contingency means that the latter can only be conceived as the completeness of everything passing away, released from the myriad of fixations of the present on the past. Completeness is never positive, but rather only in the passing away of doubt. This multiplicity of detachments is, I take it, figured by the way the final scene rehearses the situation of a play within a play. This time it is supposedly the performance of dueling between Laertes and Hamlet. While in the first performance there was nothing that could be called a tragic closure, here closure means that no one is left, or everyone dies. It is the "summation" of the many deaths of characters already taking place in the play: Polonius, Ophelia, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, are joined by Claudius, Gertrud, Laertes and Hamlet himself. Fate is not concentrated but dispersed over all characters and through Hamlet's reflection of this court, it disappears, as this whole world passes away, so that "the rest is silence."

22. Note the connection between revenge and melancholy. It is implicit in Freud's essay insofar as the melancholic is bent on attacking the internalized lost object, and it is this aggression (revenge) turned inward that blocks the melancholic from acting in the world.

23. Cavell, *DK*, 189.