

Magdalena Filipczuk*

“Epistemological Reading”: Stanley Cavell’s Method of Reading Literature¹

Abstract

Not many readers will recognize *Disowning Knowledge: Seven Plays of Shakespeare* by Stanley Cavell as either a piece of philosophical writing or literary criticism, so it may be useful to ask what method Cavell uses to read literature, what are the main features of his approach, and whether he has a coherent view on what reading literature means. I examine Cavell’s interdisciplinary eclecticism, the feature which makes his work so original, and I describe his moving away from the British and American analytic tradition in which he was trained to other sources of inspiration, especially Thoreau. I also stress the important fact that Cavell does not avoid autobiographical motifs in his writings, the style of which derives to some extent from the Jewish tradition of storytelling. In his writings Cavell declares his adherence to an ahistorical approach, maintaining that in a sense philosophy is trans-historical. In many of his books the central issue is the challenge that skepticism poses, and he endeavors to make a convincing case against it. Although Cavell’s work covers a broad range of interests, including tragedy and literature, as well as Romantic poetry, Shakespeare, Henry James and Samuel Beckett, I try to answer the question of why his analyses of skepticism in literature focus especially on the works of Shakespeare.

Key words

Stanley Cavell, method of reading literature, literature, skepticism, literary criticism, analytic philosophy

* Institute of Philosophy
Jesuit University Ignatianum in Kraków, Poland
Email: mkalemba@interia.pl

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Many authors, for example Graham Bradshaw and Millicent Bell, have discussed Shakespeare's skepticism.² Given this context, it is worth asking what makes Stanley Cavell's book *Disowning Knowledge: In Seven Plays of Shakespeare*³ particularly eye-opening and inspiring. Which method of textual interpretation does he use – or has he developed his own method? If that is the case, what should we call this method? Can we assume that it is an original way of employing hermeneutics in post-modern discourse, or is Cavell perhaps using a close reading method, as developed from the hermeneutics of ancient works?

As many critics claim, Cavell challenges the dichotomies of analytic philosophy and continental philosophy,⁴ theories of literature and philosophical commentary, and philosophy on the practical aspects of life as opposed to philosophy as a purely academic exercise. However, I would not fully agree with those who present him as highly successful and appreciated in his intellectual endeavors. In my view, Cavell is paving a path of his own which is leading him away from mainstream philosophy and various literary theories. His eclecticism is astonishing, yet is he truly interested in answering the questions that most modern scholars ask themselves within their disciplines? Instead, has he not constructed his own method, writing – and thinking – across various approaches, topics and disciplines? Doesn't his approach vary depending on what he is reading? In his work on Shakespeare and poetry he encourages his readers to rethink topics like the role of the author, the act of reading as a process, the relationship between literature and philosophy, as well as the relationship between ordinary language, literary language, and

² M. Bell, *Shakespeare's Tragic Skepticism*, Yale and London 2002; G. Bradshaw, *Shakespeare's Scepticism*, Brighton, 1987; H. Grady, *Shakespeare, Machiavelli, and Montaigne. Power and Subjectivity from Richard II to Hamlet*, Oxford 2002; R. Strier, "Shakespeare and the Sceptics", *Religion and Literature*, 2000, 32; B. Pierce, "Shakespeare and the Ten Modes of Scepticism", *Shakespeare Survey*, 1993, 46; A. Gilman Sherman, "Disowning Knowledge of Jessica, or Shylock's Skepticism", *Studies in English Literature 1500–1900*, 2004, 44. For the cultural context of skepticism in Shakespeare's times, see "Skepticism in Shakespeare's England", *Shakespearean International Yearbook* 2 (2002).

³ S. Cavell, *Disowning Knowledge: In Seven Plays of Shakespeare*, Cambridge 2003.

⁴ D. Rudrum claims that "Cavell's philosophy succeeds in accommodating the 'ordinary language' tradition of J. L. Austin and Ludwig Wittgenstein with the 'continental' tradition from Kant to Derrida and the American tradition of thought represented by Emerson and Thoreau." D. Rudrum, *Stanley Cavell and the Claim of Literature*, Baltimore 1974, p. 1.

performative utterances. In addition, he questions the status of literary characters, the meaning of characters and words themselves, the role played by ethics and politics in literary study, and the role played by autobiography in the process of writing and reading. Doesn't that sound like the representatives of many theoretical schools? However, an attempt made to classify Stanley Cavell as a representative of any of these schools would be rather unconvincing. Therefore, I agree with David Rudrum, the author of an inspiring book about Stanley Cavell titled *Stanley Cavell and the Claim of Literature*, when he writes:

For an academic reader Cavell is thus difficult in a disconcerting way. In a nutshell, if Cavell's writings on literature show us anything, it is that no serious student of either literature or philosophy can rest on the laurels of a predefined theoretical or methodological approach to his or her subject. Insights into texts from either field are not to be gained by bringing ready-made answers to them. In this respect, Cavell is emphatically not a literary theorist, and if readers of this book hope or anticipate that its task is to expound some kind of "Cavellian theory of literature" or "Cavellian literary theory," they will be – and quite possibly deserve to be – disappointed: such terms are vapid oxymorons.⁵

Cavell himself acknowledges his debts to materialism, deconstructionism, feminism and new historicism, but at the same time he writes: "I want to be able to encounter the Shakespearean corpus with a free mind."⁶ However, a free mind seems to imply ignorance. In fact, it is quite the opposite. In his writing, he also draws on a liberal selection of motifs, argumentation and questions derived from various disciplines. His writing is also broadly influenced by his experience of art. As he says himself, he "seeks to reconcile the discipline of traditional academic philosophy with a range of other humanistic disciplines, including psychoanalysis, film, music, the arts, and, above all, literature."⁷ This large field of interests makes him one of the most versatile and original American philosophers of our time.

If, according to the aforementioned critics, Cavell is so successful in his intellectual reconciliations, why is he constantly being ignored by lit-

⁵ Ibidem, p. 4.

⁶ S. Cavell, *Disowning Knowledge*, op. cit., p. 1.

⁷ Ibidem.

erary scholars, film experts, and literary theorists? Why is he neglected in most discussions held among Shakespearean scholars?⁸ Is this so, as Rudrum suggests, because of his declared lack of one particular approach? Rudrum observes that while literary theories claim the need to translate or adapt the idioms, hypotheses and thoughts of particular thinkers such as Derrida, Foucault, Lacan or Bakhtin into a method of reading various literary texts, Cavell seems to manage his close reading without a specific jargon. Neither does he appear to deem it necessary to construct a Derridian, Foucauldian, or Bakhtinian literary theory. Nor does he develop a specific theory of his own, a “Cavellian” literary theory.⁹ Even when he uses some of their textual strategies, his reading cannot be defined by them. He has a strategy of his own. Cavell calls his reading “epistemological,” and frames it in the terms of “new literary-philosophical criticism.”¹⁰ I shall now describe the main features of this method.

Cavell's Hermeneutics

There are at least two main features of Cavell's method of thinking. First, he distinguishes between intuition and hypothesis, and refers to his own thinking as an instance of intuition. Both intuitions and hypotheses require – each in their own way – what we could call confirmation or continuation. While a hypothesis requires evidence, intuition requires not so much “evidence” as a kind of understanding.¹¹

Secondly, in each of his essays Cavell concentrates on the philosophical concerns that a given text evokes. He stresses that he is not illustrating any philosophical problems with examples derived from – in this case – Shakespeare:

⁸ See D. Rudrum: “Cavell's writings on literature have been neglected, or at any rate underappreciated, by literary critics and theorists.” Also Michael Fischer, the first to address Cavell's “neglect by American literary theorists.” See also Garrett Stewart's remark: “some of the most passionate and commanding essays on literary aesthetics and literary value to be found anywhere in the postwar critical canon,” D. Rudrum, op. cit., p. 4.

⁹ Cf. ibidem, p. 3.

¹⁰ S. Cavell, *Must We Mean What We Say? A Book of Essays*, Cambridge 1976, p. 110.

¹¹ Cf. S. Cavell, *Disowning Knowledge*, op. cit., p. 4.

The misunderstanding of my attitude that most concerned me was to take my project as the application of some philosophically independent problematic of skepticism to a fragmentary parade of Shakespearean texts, impressing those texts into the service of illustrating philosophical conclusions known in advance.¹²

Stanley Cavell’s writing is an extraordinary example of a peculiarly constructive and creative engagement of philosophy and literature.

I become perplexed in trying to determine whether it is to addicts of philosophy or to adepts of literature that I address myself when I in effect insist that Shakespeare could not be who he is – the burden of the name of the greatest writer in the language, the creature of the greatest ordering of English – unless his writing is engaging the depth of the philosophical preoccupations of his culture.¹³

He studies authors ranging from Thoreau to Beckett to explore “the participation of philosophy and literature in one another.”¹⁴ Asked by Borradori if he considers himself a writer or a philosopher, Cavell answers:

There’s no question in my mind that my motivation, ever since I can remember, has been to write. In music, it was to write. When music fell apart for me, it’s not exactly that I thought the writing I did was bad. I felt it wasn’t anything I was saying, just something I had learned to do. The road that took me to philosophy was an attempt to discover a way to write that I could believe.¹⁵

No wonder, then, that the fundamental question Stanley Cavell explicitly poses at the end of *The Claim of Reason* (and also implicitly in *Disowning Knowledge*), is “can philosophy become literature and still know itself?” Although Cavell obviously distinguishes between philosophical

¹² Ibidem, p. 1.

¹³ Ibidem, p. 2.

¹⁴ Idem, *In Quest of Ordinary: Lines of Skepticism and Romanticism*, Chicago 1988, p. 12.

¹⁵ G. Borradori, “An Apology for Skepticism”, [in:] eadem, *American Philosopher. Conversations with Quine, Davidson, Putnam, Nozick, Danto, Rorty, Cavell, MacIntyre, and Kuhn*, Chicago, p. 129.

criticism and literary criticism, he would probably not apply this distinction to his own writing. However, he does note that every philosophy produces criticism directed against other philosophers, or against common sense in general¹⁶.

As Cavell tells us in *The Claim of Reason*, his aim is “to help bring the human voice back into philosophy.”¹⁷ But what does this mean specifically? Since his encounter with J.F. Austin, to whom he dedicates an extensive description in *A Pitch of Philosophy: Autobiographical Exercises*, Stanley Cavell has gone deeply into analytic philosophy, the so-called “philosophy of everyday use,” as demonstrated in various interviews. Frequently, Cavell underlines that his thinking concerns the evaluation of everyday life and ordinary language. Austin himself made an enormous impression and exerted a lasting influence on the young Cavell, both in their encounters during his stay at Harvard as visiting professor, and also through his books, particularly in *How To Do Things with Words*. Cavell was also fascinated by Austin’s withdrawal from an attempt to construct an ideal language and his “quest of the ordinary;”¹⁸ and finally, by Austin and Wittgenstein showing that some problems in philosophy come from misunderstandings of the language of everyday use. If we treat analytic philosophers as completely absorbed by the search for precision in formulating problems, Cavell would undoubtedly count as one of them. On the other hand, if Scott Soames is correct in emphasizing the clarity of the intellectual approach of a given philosopher, then Cavell, with his original and complicated, apparently flexible syntax and sentence structure, diverges very considerably from the clarity and precision that are the epitome of the claims of analytic methods.

Cavell on Shakespeare

Although Cavell never shirks his responsibility for his own words, some parts of his analysis of Shakespearean texts included in his *Disowning Knowledge* seem provocative, as he intentionally engages the reader in

¹⁶ Cf. S. Cavell, *Must We Mean What We Say*, p. 152.

¹⁷ This is how Cavell describes his main aim in *A Claim of Reason*: “If I had had then to give a one-clause sense of that book’s reason for existing it might have been: ‘to help bring the human voice back into philosophy.’” S. Cavell, *A Pitch of Philosophy. Autobiographical Exercises*, London and Cambridge, Massachusetts 1994, p. 58.

¹⁸ See idem, *In Quest of the Ordinary*, op. cit.

his process of thinking, never directly presenting the meaning he is invoking. This is how he puts it:

In looking for words for Shakespeare's interpretations of skepticism I may well from time to time, in my experimentation, speak incredibly or outrageously. For me this is no more serious, though no less, than making a mistake in computation – if the words do not go through they will simply drop out as worthless. My aim in reading is to follow out in each case the complete tuition for a given intuition (tuition comes to an end somewhere). This has nothing to do with – it is a kind of negation of – an idea of reading as a judicious balancing of all reasonable interpretations. My reading is nothing if not partial (another lovely Emersonian word). Yet some will take my claim to partiality as more arrogant than the claim to judiciousness.¹⁹

Therefore, in many passages of *Disowning Knowledge*, Cavell's writing shifts from the level of direct statement to the level of indirect suggestion. Not only is his interpretation presented as one possibility, but it also opens up a new horizon of potential readings of those lines that he finds particularly interesting and meaningful.

Cavell seems to owe his own mode of expression, structured within the frame of suggestion rather than statement, mainly to his father and his stories told of and by rabbis, as well as the mystic tradition in Judaism, in which Cavell's main mentor is Gershom Scholem. The other source of Cavell's inspiration in this respect is Thoreau and his book *Walden*. If we take a closer look at the structure of Cavell's sentences, we find that the syntax is highly convoluted and the message is far from completion, as if he were engaging in a constant search for the right word and tone of "voice" (a very important term for Cavell). Usually, the reader finds that Cavell meditates on the text/book as a whole, rather than on its themes, inviting us to do the same.

Cavell returns to several books that have had a long-lasting strong influence on him. His reading list, as Michael Fischer, his first biographer, puts it: "seems disappointingly short and well-worn (who hasn't already read *Walden* or the 'Intimations Ode'?)."²⁰ Instead of reaching for a new text, going onto paths not yet explored, Cavell usually encourages us to read well-known texts such as *King Lear*, *Othello*, or *Walden*, but in a new

¹⁹ Idem, *Disowning Knowledge*, op. cit., p. 5.

²⁰ M. Fischer, *Stanley Cavell and Literary Skepticism*, Chicago 1989, p. 7.

way, with an open mind, in order to see the real meaning of those words, to discover them for ourselves. We find that frequently we can read his meditative remarks on several different levels. The following sentences are an example:

Yet I find I do not believe that a father can fail to know the origin of his son's voice, however at variance their accents. How can I doubt it when I might summarize my life in philosophy as directed to discovering the child's voice – unless this itself attests to my knowledge that it is denied, shall I say unacknowledged?²¹

What Cavell calls a “child’s voice” means something different for each reader. Instead of rational discourse, we encounter a question. Since Cavell does not hesitate to put episodes from his autobiography in his essays, we can find that his father, the best teller of Yiddish stories in their circle of immigrants, greatly influenced Cavell’s writing in many ways. We often have the impression that like his father, Cavell leaves us with a meaningful ending: “now it is going to be up to you, Rabbi, to decide which rabbi you agree with.”²²

It seems that Cavell has incorporated some of Thoreau’s paradoxes of reading and writing from his book *The Senses of Walden*. As he says, it is all about “letting ourselves be instructed by texts we care about.”²³ We could thus easily mistake and treat some of Thoreau’s intuitions as Cavell’s:

If there is not something mystical in your explanation, something unexplainable to the understanding, some elements of mystery, it is quite insufficient. If there is nothing in it which speaks to my imagination, what boots it?²⁴

First of all a man must see, before he can say. Statements are made but partially. Things are said with reference to certain conventions or existing institutions, not absolutely.²⁵

²¹ S. Cavell, *Pitch of Philosophy*, op. cit., p. 38.

²² Ibidem, p. xiv.

²³ S. Cavell, *In Quest of the Ordinary*, op. cit., p. 53.

²⁴ H.D. Thoreau, *The Journal of Henry David Thoreau*, Boston 1906, v. 3, ch. 3, p. 156; [online] https://www.walden.org/library/the_writings_of_henry_david_thoreau:_the_digital_collection/journal [accessed: 9.06.2016].

²⁵ Ibidem, v. 3, ch. 2, p. 85.

So far as thinking is concerned, surely original thinking is the divinest thing.²⁶

Hence, Cavell is obviously under the influence of the interpretative school of thought in which intuitions are the foundation for understanding; in which "little common things" are the most important, and the focus is not on an analytical understanding of individual elements in our field of vision, but on their mutual relationships. Of course, this is not a hermeneutic understanding – indeed quite the opposite. Thoreau accuses this understanding of a lack of hermeneutic wealth.

Thoreau seems to be the one who reassures Cavell in what he himself calls "a lifelong quarrel with the profession of philosophy."²⁷ As we find in *Walden*:

There are nowadays professors of philosophy, but not philosophers. Yet it is admirable to profess because it was once admirable to live. To be a philosopher is not merely to have subtle thoughts, nor even to found a school, but so to love wisdom as to live according to its dictates, a life of simplicity, independence, magnanimity, and trust. It is to solve some of the problems of life, not only theoretically, but practically.²⁸

That is the essence of philosophy of everyday life and it seems this is exactly why Cavell is considered to be a post-analytic, not an analytic philosopher. Some of his accusations against analytic philosophy are that it has no relevance to everyday life and human concerns; its jargon, its exclusionism; its intelligibility only to a small number of experts; its lack of interest in the rest of the humanities, which is incomprehensible for those who do not understand the analytic language; a lack of interest in other philosophical discussions apart from analytic philosophy; its narrow-mindedness; and that it is a trend that isolates itself off from the history of Western philosophy and from the history of other philosophical traditions.²⁹ These charges do not apply in any way to Stanley

²⁶ Ibidem, v. 3, ch. 2, p. 119.

²⁷ *TOS Themes Out of School: Effects and Causes*, Chicago 1984, p. 31.

²⁸ H.D. Thoreau, *Walden or Life in the Woods and On the Duty of Civil Disobedience*, New York and Toronto 1960, p. 14

²⁹ These were formulated by Jee Lo Liu, Alexander Nehemas, Neil Levy and Hilary Putnam. Jee Lo Liu, "The Challenge of Teaching Analytic Philosophy to Undergraduates", *Expositions*, 2015, 9.2, pp. 88–98. See also A. Nehamas, "Trends in Re-

Cavell's work. Typical for Cavell's "out of box" thinking is his asking the same questions as Martin Heidegger in "What Is Called Thinking?" Thus the "what philosophy is all about" issue is central to Cavell's writing.

Soames writes that analytic philosophy has "an implicit commitment—albeit faltering and imperfect—to the ideals of clarity, rigor and argumentation" and that it "aims at truth and knowledge, as opposed to moral or spiritual improvement . . . the goal in analytic philosophy is to discover what is true, not to provide a useful recipe for living one's life."³⁰

Stanley Cavell instead seems to be taking a position that to acquire real knowledge, moral or ethical, one must move beyond syllogistic reasoning and standard argumentative prose. This is how he describes what philosophy is for a young man:

When you go to college, for some people philosophy can happen early – it inevitably happens early, but you don't recognize it. That is, questions of the sort of: "What was the first thing in existence?" Or, "What is God?" Or, "Is there a best life for me to lead?" Or, "What is love?" So you may stay up all night asking yourself these questions, and you may not call it philosophy. And when you get to college you learn that there's a name for this. And then if you seek out the people who know this name and who are talking these things, it turns out, empirically – certainly, this is not a theoretical answer – that those are the people whose conversations you want most to

cent American Philosophy", *Daedalus*, 1997, 126.1 (*American Academic Culture in Transformation: Fifty Years, Four Disciplines*).

³⁰ S. Soames, *The Dawn of Analysis*, Princeton, New York 2003, pp. xiii–xvii; S. Soames, *Philosophical Analysis in the Twentieth Century*, Vol. 1, Princeton, New York 2003, p. xv. However if we take another feature of analytic tradition, such as focusing on small issues and thoroughly rethinking them, instead of thinking within a philosophical conceptual system, Cavell definitely concurs with the assumption that it is worth starting from one verb or from one short sentence, examining it and trying to extrapolate its meaning. "There is, I think, a widespread presumption within the tradition that it is often possible to make philosophical progress by intensively investigating a small, circumscribed range of philosophical issues while holding broader, systematic questions in abeyance. What distinguishes twentieth-century analytic philosophy from at least some philosophy in other traditions, or at other times, is not a categorical rejection of philosophical systems, but rather the acceptance of a wealth of smaller, more thorough and more rigorous, investigations that need not be tied to any overarching philosophical view." *Ibidem*, p. xv.

participate in. That is a way to discover this, which means you need to be exposed to these things one way or another. That’s a way to test it.³¹

Literature, particularly poetry, seems to be Cavell’s main inspiration. As many critics convincingly point out, Cavell’s reading of literature does not have much to do with the analytic method of reading the text as just the text. In his literary interpretations, for example of Shakespeare’s plays, Cavell constantly infuses his reading with his own philosophy, with his way of thinking, and – finally – with his autobiography. Not only does he regard himself as a reader in a quite original way, but he also likes to think of the characters in the play as particular people, much like the ones we encounter in ordinary life. Cavell is aware of the ongoing discussions among Shakespearean scholars: whether the reader should treat Shakespeare’s text as an extended metaphor, or as a dramatic poem in which rhythm and symbols are fundamental for the play; whether the characters in the play are a poetic vision and not human at all;³² or whether the meaning of the plays is conveyed in the characters through the written or spoken words, hence whether the characters are realistic psychologically. However, Cavell challenges the discussion itself:

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?³³

As Gerald L. Bruns observes:

Cavell’s hermeneutics is a species of romantic hermeneutics, in which to understand means to understand other people, and not texts, meanings or even intentions. In other words, for Cavell, hermeneutics always leads to an understanding of the other *as* the other. This process runs in both directions:

³¹ W.M. Cabot, *A Philosopher Goes to the Movies. Conversation with Stanley Cavell*, Conversations with History series, Berkeley, online: <http://globetrotter.berkeley.edu/people2/Cavell/cavell-con0.html> [accessed: 9.06.2016].

³² L.C. Knights, “How many children had Lady Macbeth”, [in:] *Hamlet and other Shakespearean Essays*, Cambridge–London–Melbourne 1979.

³³ S. Cavell, *Disowning Knowledge*, op. cit., p. 41.

Cavell also feels as if he was being understood by the writer whose work he is currently studying, as if that relationship was present and alive.³⁴

Cavell says:

The experience of reading the *Investigations* was comparable to what had happened when I read Freud's lectures on psychoanalysis. I had the impression that this person [Freud] knows me, that this text knows me.³⁵

We therefore see here a specific empathy, always framed at a specific moment in someone's life. On many occasions during his lifetime Cavell tried to read *Walden* but did not succeed until he was in his forties, discovering it as a text in an absolutely personal way. As he recounts, he reads *Walden* as he would read himself in a different time and in a different life.

Cavell does not hesitate to put these confessions into his narratives. On the contrary, he finds them most important and truly significant for the reader. He stresses the fact that he tries to find his own voice in a strictly personal, not scholarly, style of writing. This seems to be his main intellectual goal. In *A Pitch of Philosophy* he declares:

I propose here to talk about philosophy in connection with something. I call the voice, by which I mean to talk at once about the tone of philosophy and about my right to take that tone; and to conduct my talking, to some unspecified extent, anecdotally, which is more or less to say, autobiographically.³⁶

The Trans-historical Approach

Cavell freely uses the motifs, tropes and themes of various literary and philosophical traditions and underlines his own trans-historical approach. As he says in an interview with Borradori:

³⁴ G. L. Bruns, "Stanley Cavell's Shakespeare", *Critical Inquiry*, Spring 1990, 16, 3, p. 621.

³⁵ G. Borradori, "An Apology for Skepticism", [in:] eadem, *American Philosopher, Conversations with Quine, Davidson, Putnam, Nozick, Danto, Rorty, Cavell, MacIntyre, and Kuhn*, Chicago 1994, p. 129.

³⁶ S. Cavell, *A Pitch of Philosophy*, op. cit., p. 3.

... in a philosophical sense, Nietzsche certainly was responding to Emerson, and that's what interests me most. It is the same empathy. Thoreau says, "I am the ancient Egyptian and Hindu philosopher." Now, philosophy in this sense is trans-historical. Or, at least, it gets transfigured throughout history.³⁷

Using this methodological assumption, the question arises of how this functions in Cavell's approach to Shakespearean texts. Can we put aside the historical background of this Elizabethan playwright, can we analyze his puns and his characters as if they were elements of a play by a modern author? Of course we can't. Here we are confronted with a kind of experiment. When Cavell is sharing with us his intuition that the advent of skepticism, which we can find in *Meditations* by Descartes, is already "in full existence" in Shakespeare,³⁸ he provokes us to read *Othello* and *King Lear* (and many other plays) in a new and refreshing way. It is almost redundant to say that it's an ahistorical approach. Compare the dates – Shakespeare lived from 1564 to 1616 (his main tragedies such as *Hamlet*, *Othello*, *King Lear* were written before 1608), while *Meditations on First Philosophy* appeared in 1641. So Cavell's approach to the subject would definitely be challenged not only by traditional Shakespearean scholars but also by representatives of New Historicism, a paramount trend in Shakespeare studies since the 1980's.

Overcoming Skepticism

As I have already observed, Cavell's ideas focus on skepticism, which seems to be his intellectual obsession. It is in the context of skepticism that Cavell analyzes philosophers and writers as diverse as Emerson, Montaigne, Wittgenstein, Nietzsche, and Freud. It is skepticism serves as the point of departure for his insightful and original analysis of some of Shakespeare's darkest tragedies. In the process, Cavell sheds light on the problem of "groundlessness" – one of his key terms – important not only in the context of the motives of the characters in Shakespeare's plays, but also in his analyzes of contemporary poetry. Cavell does not make use of the ideas of the aforementioned philosophers in a typical way. In-

³⁷ G. Borradori, op. cit., p. 132.

³⁸ S. Cavell, *Disowning Knowledge*, op. cit., p. 3.

stead, he shows us that their thinking illuminates some of the most profound and apparently incomprehensible of Shakespeare's metaphors concerning perception (and the so-called "problem of other minds").

Cavell says that in an earlier phase of skepticism, before Shakespeare, the main issue was how to conduct oneself best in an uncertain world; in what he calls "the Shakespearean version of skepticism" we come across the suggestion of an answer to the problem of how to live at all in a groundless world.³⁹

In his interpretation of Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations*, Cavell claims that according to Wittgenstein true knowledge is beyond our reach. This is the case whenever a word is used outside its proper context, its language game. Do such words have the power, as Cavell claims, to counterbalance an overwhelming groundlessness? The idea seems to be this: Skepticism affirms "unknowableness from outside," as Cavell's motto reads.⁴⁰ Simon Critchley points out that Cavell's skepticism is his life *praxis*: "I live my skepticism," says Cavell.⁴¹ We could even say that his skepticism has more in common with the skepticism of the Ancients, in a kind of existential epoch, than with the strictly epistemological modern skepticism.

Is the skeptic right to point out that there are always reasonable grounds for doubt? According to Cavell, the answer to this question should be "yes," although he wonders why this is so: is skepticism biologically determined? Cavell uses gender discourse, asking if skepticism could also be determined by gender. The male characters of *King Lear*, *Othello* and *The Winter's Tale* seriously doubt if their children are really theirs and the woman they love really requites their love. Cavell formulates the following questions, which he then leaves unanswered: "Is what he calls ontological doubt something typical for men, but not for women? Are women capable of putting everything, especially their own maternity, into question despite the strong biological bond they develop as mothers?" As usual, Cavell does not answer these questions, but stresses an aspect that is usually not considered – perhaps we might speak not of men and women, but of the masculine and feminine aspects of the human character?⁴²

³⁹ See *ibidem*, p. 3.

⁴⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 29; and many parts of *idem*, *Must We Mean What We Say?*, *op. cit.*

⁴¹ S. Cavell, *Claim of Reason. Wittgenstein, Scepticism, Morality and Tragedy*, Oxford 1979, p. 437.

⁴² Cf. S. Cavell, *Disowning Knowledge*, *op. cit.*, p. 16.

Why Shakespeare

In his sonnet *On Shakespeare* written in 1630, John Milton remarks that faced with his work, we, his readers, are in "wonder and astonishment" and that we are the ones who have built "a life-long monument" to the poet. Milton calls Shakespeare's verse "Delphic lines." If we put aside the typical 17th-century panegyric formulation of "wonder and astonishment," we see that the sonnet reveals something very important. By using the term "Delphic lines" Milton points to the multiple interpretative choices faced by any reader of Shakespeare. His works are full of philosophical riddles – *gnomai* – that not only provide an intellectual and aesthetic treat but also provoke us to re-think ourselves and our way of looking at the world. Most importantly for Cavell, they also challenge us to reconsider the meaning of the words we use, and what we call knowledge and acknowledgment.⁴³

Let me quote a few lines from Shakespeare that strike Cavell as especially provoking: "Is this the promised end? Or image of that horror?"⁴⁴ "To be or not to be"⁴⁵ "A tale told by an idiot"⁴⁶ "Look down and see what death is doing"⁴⁷ "Then must you find out new heaven, new earth."⁴⁸ After such words, says Cavell, there is no standing ground of redemption. "Nothing but the ability to be spoken for by these words, to meet upon them, will weigh in the balance against these visions of groundlessness."⁴⁹

If words indeed are – as Cavell claims – pregnant with meaning, then in the case of *King Lear*, for example, their meaning will remain only potential, hidden and nascent. Both Shakespeare and Cavell consider the problem of the emptiness of the words with which we address the OTHER. Cavell presents a very sophisticated analysis of the way Shakespeare's

⁴³ "Acknowledgment" is another term of crucial importance for Cavell. Its special nature derives from the fact that according to Cavell it is through the "acknowledgment" of a person as herself that she is able to overcome her skepticism at all.

⁴⁴ "Kent: Is this the promis'd end? Edgar: Or image of that horror?" W. Shakespeare, *King Lear*, Act III, sc. v, 309–310 [in:] idem, *Complete Works*, Leicester 1991, p. 941.

⁴⁵ Idem, *Hamlet*, Act III, sc. i, 57 [in:] idem, *Complete Works*, op. cit., p. 887.

⁴⁶ Idem, *Macbeth*, Act V, sc. v, 17–28 [in:] idem, *Complete Works*, op. cit., p. 868.

⁴⁷ Idem, *The Winter's Tale*, Act III, sc. ii, 145–146 [in:] idem, *Complete Works*, op. cit., p. 336

⁴⁸ "Then must thou needs find out new heaven, new earth." *Anthony and Cleopatra*, Act I, sc. i, 18 [in:] idem, *Complete Works*, op. cit., p. 977.

⁴⁹ S. Cavell, *Disowning Knowledge*, p. 19.

language functions in the poet's thought world. He attempts to show not only the arbitrary way in which words "slice up" and falsify our relation with other human beings and with ourselves (as we can observe in *Hamlet* or in *Richard II*), but he also tries to show the way our confidence in words gradually undermines our sensitivity to our real experience.

Cavell suggests that it is exactly in this sense that we could call *King Lear* a philosophical drama. What is most important for Cavell in this tragedy is the idea of missing something, not understanding what seems to be obvious. Apart from the main protagonist of *King Lear*, Cavell also considers characters from Shakespeare's other dramas: *Othello*, *Coriolanus*, *Hamlet*, *The Winter's Tale*, and *Antony and Cleopatra*. What he finds interesting about these plays is that they seem to embody (but not illustrate) some powerful intuition that was first grasped by Shakespeare and emerged in the development of modern philosophical tradition as the problem of skepticism. In an interview with Borradori, Cavell defines skepticism as follows:

Skepticism is the denial of the need to listen. It's the refusal of the ear. Skepticism denies that perfection is available through the human ear, through the human sensibility. This is what Wittgenstein calls the "sublimation" of our language. We are all too human. Skepticism as a search for the inhuman is a search for a means to the perfection of the ear, to the extent that the ear is no longer required to listen. It is the denial of having to hear.⁵⁰

Skepticism is the denial of the need to listen, because if we cannot know whether the world exists, we cannot know whether the other exists, and whether they have the same feelings as we, or whether they have any feelings at all. Cavell gives us various opportunities to fully realize the extent of the challenge posed by skepticism. Let's take a closer look at a passage from *The Claim of Reason*, in which Cavell analyzes an example suggested by Wittgenstein. Someone else has a toothache but we can't be sure that the person is not faking:

And then perhaps the still, small voice: Is it one? Is he having one [toothache]? Naturally I do not say that doubt cannot insinuate itself here. In particular I do not say that if it does I can turn it aside by saying, "But that's what is *called* having a toothache." This abjectly begs the question – if the-

⁵⁰ G. Borradori, op. cit., p. 133.

re is a question. But what *is* the doubt now? That he is actually suffering. But in the face of *that* doubt, *in the presence of full criteria*, it is desperate to continue: "I'm justified in saying; I'm almost certain." My feeling is: There is nothing any longer to be almost certain about. I've gone the route of certainty. Certainty itself hasn't taken me far enough. And to say now, "But that is what we call having a toothache," would be mere babbling in the grip of my condition. The only thing that could conceivably have been called "his having a toothache" – his actual horror itself – has dropped out, withdrawn beyond my reach. – Was it always beyond me? Or is my condition to be understood some other way? (What is my condition? Is it doubt? It is in any case expressed here by speechlessness.)⁵¹

Cavell argues that we can see here that skepticism expresses itself as some form of a denial of an existence shared with others, which for Cavell means principally a denial of the human. Particularly in his reading of Shakespeare's *Coriolanus*, Cavell takes into account "an interpretation that takes skepticism as a form of narcissism."⁵² Othello, who regards himself as a "perfect soul," wants something that is impossible to possess. As Cavell says, "He cannot forgive Desdemona for existing, for being separate from him, outside, beyond command, commanding, her captain's captain."⁵³ Othello is an ideal example for Cavell, since as a skeptic, he is searching for certainty, for "proof." That search finally becomes a form of madness. Cavell treats this desire to know for certain and beyond all doubt as a neurotic symptom. He analyzes the possibility of a direct psychoanalytic interpretation of skepticism and recognizes this desire in every Shakespearean play that he studies.

Summary

Cavell suggests that we can learn how to overcome skepticism by looking at what is required to love, trust, or simply acknowledge the existence of another person. Because we cannot know for sure that the world exists, we ought to conclude that "the world is to be accepted, as the presentness of other minds is not to be known, but acknowledged."⁵⁴ There-

⁵¹ S. Cavell, *Claim of Reason*, op. cit., p. 70.

⁵² Idem, *Disowning Knowledge*, op. cit., p. 143.

⁵³ Ibidem, p. 136.

⁵⁴ Ibidem, p. 95.

fore he considers literary works such as the plays of Shakespeare as part of the ongoing discussion in modern philosophy about the nature and limits of human knowledge.

According to Cavell, despite the claim made by new criticism, it is impossible to teach anyone to read poetry – either in the literal sense of knowing how to make it sound good, or in the metaphorical sense of being able to interpret it. So he does not give us any tools or a vocabulary that could be useful in analyzing the puns, riddles and metaphors. Heidegger, whom Cavell quotes so often, claims that thinking may be much the same as wandering.⁵⁵ We are invited to accompany Cavell in his experience of reading. He does not aspire to be transparent or fully coherent. While he questions the existence of “correct interpretation” or rather asks the rhetorical question what that might be and whether works of literature are to be used as evidence of correct/incorrect interpretation – he makes us active partners in his writing. For his readers “many directions are thereby opened...”⁵⁶

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⁵⁵ Cf. M. Heidegger, “The End of Philosophy and the Task of Thinking”, [in:] idem, *Basic Writings*, trans. David Farrell Krell, San Francisco 1977, p. 386.

⁵⁶ S. Cavell, *Disowning Knowledge*, op. cit., p. 16.

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