

**The Struggle Against Symbolism: Successes And Failures in
Stanley Cavell's Readings Of Shakespeare**

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Let me say at once that the "struggle against symbolism" in my title is almost certainly not the way that Stanley Cavell would describe the goal and effort of his literary criticism. The reason why I want to see Cavell's criticism in this way, and evaluate it in this light, is because I think that Cavell should see his literary criticism in this way. And I say this because of the way in which Cavell's literary (and film and other) criticism is meant to be part of -- to be compatible with, to illuminate and to be illuminated by -- his philosophical project. His project is to take some of the most exotic moments of early modern and modern philosophy -- Descartes sitting in his dressing gown wondering whether the world exists; Wittgenstein wondering to whom a pain should be ascribed -- and to show such moments to be, in an informative and non-pejorative sense, ordinary. He wants to use "ordinary language philosophy" not as a way around or out of philosophical dilemmas (as Austin did) but as a way into and, in a sense, through them.¹ He sees the ordinary not as the "cure" for philosophy but as the realm in which it does and must take place. This is why the literal, the obvious, the surface in texts should be of primary significance for him. The argument of my paper is to show that Cavell's literary criticism often fails of "ordinariness," and therefore often fails -- both as literary criticism and as part of Cavell's philosophy. To put my case succinctly, I will argue that Stanley Cavell's literary criticism is most successful when it stays closest to his philosophy, least successful when it is most "literary."

This issue of intellectual "fit" comes up immediately in Cavell's first Shakespeare essay, the essay on *King Lear*. This piece contains some lovely moments of the kind that I take to be central to Cavell's philosophical endeavor (or his endeavor with regard to philosophy). He talks about how strange it is that "character criticism" and "verbal analysis" should be at odds in the history of literary criticism. He lays out an alternative to the New Critical picture of texts, an alternative to the view according to which a critic seeks to discern and reconstruct "a (more or less) hidden structure of which the individual words are parts." He suggests, instead, that "another mode of attention to the particular words themselves" would be

directed to the voice which says them, and through that to the phenomenology of the straits of mind in which only those words said in that order will suffice; here the picture is of a spiritual instant or passage for which only these words discover release, in which they mean deeply not because they mean many things but because they mean one thing completely.²

This seems to me to describe a distinctive project that is at once literary and philosophical, a project as austere and beautiful as the prose in which it is described. It is a project that reconceives the concept of "depth" and sees getting to this as not a matter of seeing what is hidden but of understanding what is obviously "there." The project is one of attention to contextual and psychic *specificity* -- to use a word that Cavell brings forth in a paragraph that follows hard upon the sentence quoted here.

It is therefore with some astonishment that one finds, as Cavell turns to *Lear*, that his reading of the play is going to take its orientation from *opposing* Paul Alpers' essay on "*King Lear* and the Theory of the Sight-Pattern."³ One would have thought

that this essay would be an example of just the kind of criticism that Cavell seemed to be calling for. Alpers' essay criticizes the symbolic reading of eyes in the play and, as Cavell says, insists "upon the ordinary, literal uses of eyes: to express feeling, to weep, and to recognize others." Instead of applauding this, Cavell dismisses it. He employs a critical gesture or locution that is utterly familiar but of which he, I believe (along with all of us, I believe) should be deeply suspicious-- the gesture of dismissing the obvious as trivial: "Unquestionably there is truth in this. But" He accuses Alpers' view of being banal ("overcasual, Cavell says), of not looking hard enough to find, of all things, "meaning" (as if one could *not* find it). I want to delve a bit further into the strangeness of Cavell's rejection of Alpers, but before doing so I want to speculate for a moment on why Cavell would do this (to me) odd thing. The answer might be hinted at in the shift from "straits of mind" to "spiritual instant or passage" in the passage I have quoted and so highly lauded. The real problem with Alpers' reading, for Cavell, might not be that it is too "casual" but that it is too secular.

Now here is a more mundane suggestion. My guess is that Cavell knows the criticism that Alpers was attacking only insofar as it appears in Alpers' essay. I find it hard to believe that, after actually having read, for instance, Robert Heilman's chapter on "the sight-pattern" in *Lear*, Cavell would want to salvage some version of this way of reading-- which, as we shall see, he (to my mind) quite disastrously does. Heilman's chapter is a wonderful example of the way in which, as Empson loved to put it, "high-mindedness" in literary criticism often produces amazing moral obtuseness.⁴ Heilman assumes that a moralized version of Aristotle's *Poetics* provides the only way in which to understand tragedy. This means that Gloucester's (like *Lear*) must have a "tragic flaw," meaning a moral defect.⁵ The critic, of course (that sublimely wise being) can easily identify this defect. The critic knows what is to be valued -- reality over appearances, the symbolic and spiritual over the (merely)

literal -- and can easily see that Gloucester's "tragic flaw" is lack of "insight" into the realities that lie below the surfaces of things. On this view, eyes are never important in themselves; what is important is only "the power for which eyes are a symbol," namely, the power to have "insight."⁶ Gloucester's schematization of his own experience, "I stumbled when I saw," is taken as an absolute truth rather than as the utterance of a character. The blinding of Gloucester, for Heilman, is a triumphant moment. Here is how he treats it:

"Out vile jelly! / Where is thy lustre now?" -- Cornwall's words of triumph imply, as the speeches of Shakespeare's villains often do, more than he suspects. What Cornwall does not know is that Gloucester now sees better than he has ever seen; perhaps the final guarantee of his insight is his loss of outward sight. The vile jelly, the material seeing, had but caught reflections from the surfaces of life . . . His physical and material loss is his spiritual gain . . .⁷

The fact that Heilman (for the most "high-minded" of reasons) can seriously adopt Cornwall's characterization of Gloucester's eyes is an unmistakable sign of how badly professional reading has gone humanly awry here. For Heilman, as for Cornwall, Gloucester's eyes are "vile jelly."

Alpers tried to restore some sanity to all this. His focus was less on the moral horror than on the weird abstractness of "symbolic" readings, but the sense of relief, of returning from the world of "literary criticism" to a recognizable world -- where eyes matter a lot -- is palpable. "Cordelia is Cordelia," Alpers says in a wonderful moment.⁸ Why need she be a "symbol" of something? Yet Alpers' essay also testifies to how strangely difficult it is to refrain from symbolic reading, from moralizing about the characters, from condescending to them, and from finding neat, soulless paradoxes (Lear's enfeeblement as enabling, for instance).⁹ Instead

of trying to be even more literal than Alpers in his reading, Cavell returns to the "sight pattern." He insists that the blinding must have a "meaning" beyond its revelation of the extent of human cruelty and sadism, and beyond the terrible, non-literary paradox that eyes, immensely important as they are to human beings, really are terribly fragile. Cavell insists, à la Heilman, that the blinding of Gloucester is "related to necessities of Gloucester's character" (p. 47). The difference between Cavell and Heilman is that Cavell has a less standard, more philosophically original account of Gloucester's (supposed) moral flaw-- he failed to "acknowledge" Edmund. It is not clear that this is precisely true -- sending a son "out" was quite normal in aristocratic families -- but the force of this claim in Cavell's essay comes from the importance of the notion of "acknowledgment" in Cavell's own philosophy.¹⁰ The essay on *King Lear* is the final essay in Cavell's first book, *Must We Mean What We Say?* (1969); the essay that immediately precedes it is the philosophical culmination of the volume, giving Cavell's fullest "diagnosis" of skepticism, his fullest "answer" to it, and his clearest tribute to the importance of poetry. It is entitled "Knowing and Acknowledging." "Acknowledgment" is Cavell's answer to skepticism; that essay, developing the key term in systematic contrast with the key term of skepticism, is virtually a Cavellian credo. Gloucester's "failure," therefore, is as serious to Cavell as the equivalent "failure" is to Heilman. The result is uncannily similar. Cavell's tone is less triumphant, but his moralism is equally certain:

Gloucester suffers the same punishment he inflicts: In his respectability, he avoided eyes; when respectability falls away and the disreputable come to power, his eyes are avoided. (49)

"His eyes are avoided," with a pun on "void -- this is almost as revolting a way of speaking about the blinding scene as Heilman's happy use of "vile jelly."

I do not have time to examine the rest of Cavell's reading of *Lear* in detail, but let me just note that the same moralizing and the same lack of interest in the literal prevails. Cavell makes heavy weather (so to speak) of Gloucester going to Dover. This culminates in the claim that Gloucester's identity is by then (somehow) "submerged" in Lear's-- so much for the "specificity" of characters. Cavell is no more interested in plot, in merely literal action, than the New Critics were. He pays no attention to the very clear plot reason why Gloucester is going to Dover: the letter that Gloucester received from Cordelia made it clear that that is where the French army is landing or has landed.¹¹ The distinction between Edgar and the villains of the play is entirely obscured; Edgar is seen as also "blinding" Gloucester-- performing, as Cavell says, "the *same* cruelty as that of the evil characters" (p. 55; italics Cavell's). In his rags, Edgar will not allow himself to be recognized by Gloucester -- the flip-side of acknowledgment -- and this is tantamount to "blinding" Gloucester again. Again, something has gone terribly wrong. Edgar's delay in revealing himself to Gloucester may have been a mistake -- he rebukes himself for it later -- but he may have thought that it would not provide much comfort to Gloucester to know the depths to which Gloucester's treatment of Edgar has reduced him, and, in any case, however one interprets this delay, it certainly does not show Edgar to be morally equivalent to Cornwall and company. Cavell knows that moralizing is a bad feature of criticism, and he knows that there is something wrong in the condescension of critics who "know what is good for" characters (p. 88). Yet his way of reading leads him into these-- Cavell *knows* what Edgar should have done (p. 56). And almost everyone, it turns out, blinds Gloucester. Not only Gloucester himself, and Edgar, but Lear too-- "spiritually" (p. 52). What is sad about all this is that the essay does contain some philosophically rich moments -- the analysis of acknowledgment as involving self-recognition and a willingness to be recognized; the analysis of shame -- but these are deployed in the service of "symbolic" reading.

It is part of the sadness that Cavell barely uses the points about shame and acknowledgment in relation to the scene to which they literally apply, the "recognition-scene" between Lear and Cordelia (from which, in the Quarto, "a sovereign shame" restrained Lear).¹²

Cavell's readings of *Hamlet* and of *Coriolanus* are similar to the reading of *Lear*. With regard to *Hamlet*, Cavell performs an operation parallel to his rejection of Alpers on Heilman in rejecting Harold Jenkins' rejection of W. W. Greg on the dumb-show in the play.¹³ Cavell again, in other words, embraces a piece of earlier criticism the rejection of which he ought, on his own principles, to have celebrated. To doubt the account of the murder of Hamlet Senior given by the Ghost -- in magnificent poetry ("the porches of mine ear," etc.) -- is to attempt to *create* skepticism in the play rather than to find it (or something parallel to it) there. In the name of a "Freudian" reading, this essay is constantly discounting what characters say and what things "apparently" mean (pp. 185, 187). But the reading of *Coriolanus* is more extended, more important, and even more peculiar and indicative. Cavell knows that the play is about politics, but he cannot get himself to focus on this in a sustained way. He says that it is a play about "the foundation of the political" rather than about politics (p. 165), but this is a distinction without a difference. He grudgingly acknowledges that Brecht's reading of the politics of the play is "no small matter," and he can see that "exactly the power of Brecht's discussion can be said to be its success in getting us not to interpret, not, above, all, to interpret food" (p. 146), but Cavell cannot build on this power. He thinks that the psychoanalytic interpretations of the play have been "more interesting" than the political (p. 145), but he is not satisfied with Janet Adelman's very specific and contextualized psychoanalytic readings. With regard to a key passage, Cavell insists on a non-contextual reading of a complicated comparison, and this reading becomes the key to the true meaning of the play-- "Coriolanus' connection with the

figure of Christ" (p. 159). Random (and sometimes oddly characterized) details in the play are seen as parallel to bits and pieces of the New Testament. The play in itself seems to Cavell too literal, too austere, too straightforward-- so it must be hiding its mystery. It cannot live by bread alone.

Non-contextualized use of words and phrases is the dominant feature of Cavell's reading of *The Winter's Tale* as dominated by economic thinking -- his key terms (parturition and participation) and puns ("re-counting") never appear in the play, and he resorts to lists of words out of context (p. 200). But I do not want this paper to be merely, in Iago's sense, "critical" of Cavell. I want to note -- dare I say, acknowledge -- that there are many wonderful aperçus of various kinds scattered here and there even in the essays I have thus far discussed. And I want to end on what I consider Cavell's critical successes on Shakespeare-- his pages on *Antony and Cleopatra* and, most of all, his essay on *Othello*. In this work, Cavell's critical procedures seem perfectly in harmony with his philosophical commitments and investigations. It is no accident that both of these plays are about the domestic, or the private, about marriage. Marriage is a topic in relation to which Cavell's philosophical and critical skills have most frequently come together (cohabited perhaps [see p. 29]). The work on *Antony and Cleopatra* is directly related to Cavell's work on Hollywood comedy of the 1930's (which is perhaps his best critical work).¹⁴ He can give full metaphysical and theatrical weight to Cleopatra's "Husband, I come," and he can beautifully see in the arc of Cleopatra's development "a tender mercy toward the common"-- which, he says, I am sure sincerely, he "craves" (p. 32).

But it is the *Othello* reading that most illuminatingly links Cavell's philosophical project to his reading of Shakespeare (and *vice versa*). The *Othello* analysis forms the conclusion of Cavell's most extended work of (more or less) "straight" philosophy, *The Claim of Reason* (1979), and he uses *Othello* to explain his whole

Shakespeare project in the "Introduction" to *Disowning Knowledge* (pp. 5-12). In the phenomenology of skepticism that Cavell offers, he sees the skeptic as (literally) staking the world on a particular object, on the "best case" of a knowable thing. So the skeptic and the obsessed or "romantic" lover come together in this "staking" ("*Othello* and the Stake of the Other" is the title of Cavell's essay). Cavell sees the skeptic as making an impossible demand on both the special object and the world, and Cavell sees the skeptic as losing both out of an inability or unwillingness to accept his own finitude and limitations. Cavell finds such an unwillingness in Othello. He points to Othello's sense of his own "perfect soul" and to his conception of his own "inner visage," which Desdemona also apprehends ("I saw Othello's visage in his mind"). Cavell sees Othello's "believing" Iago about Desdemona as the product of a wish in Othello not to know something else-- Desdemona's, and therefore his own, finitude, imperfection, fleshliness as these are demonstrated and played out in their shared sexuality. So Othello must make a perfect inanimate, maximally "knowable," thing of her -- a stone, or a statue -- and he must do it on their marriage bed with their wedding sheets on it. One can already see how fully here the specificities of the language and the plot of the play converge with, indeed are truly identical with, with Cavell's concerns about the difficulties of accepting finitude. Cavell's own thought seems to be truly "tracking" Shakespeare's here-- describing in a particular vocabulary, but not one that is very far from the world of the play -- what is truly, obviously, literally there.

Cavell's work on Shakespeare might be seen as a struggle to become an "ordinary language" critic in much the same sense that Cavell is, or aspires to be, an "ordinary language" philosopher. Poetry, however, seems to tempt him much further and more regularly away from the ordinary than philosophy does. Even his prose is affected, losing its spareness and beauty. Unlike Plato, however, Cavell does not therefore want to banish poetry. He wants to marry it.

NOTES

¹ In *Must We Mean What We Say?* (New York, 1969), see the title essay, "The Availability of Wittgenstein's Later Philosophy," "Austin at Criticism," and "Knowing and Acknowledging."

² Stanley Cavell, *Disowning Knowledge in Six Plays of Shakespeare* (Cambridge, 1987), p. 40. All of Cavell's discussions of Shakespeare are cited from this volume, from which all quotations henceforth will appear in the text.

³ Paul Alpers, "King Lear and the Theory of the "Sight-Pattern,"" in Reuben A. Brower and Richard Poirier, ed., *In Defense of Reading* (New York, 1963), pp. 133-152. Hereafter cited as "Alpers," followed by a page reference.

⁴ William Empson, review of Heilman's *This Great Stage* (see n. 5 below), *Kenyon Review* 11 (1949), 351; see also Empson's 1964 review of Clifford Leech's handbook on *The Duchess of Malfi* reprinted in *John Webster, A Critical Anthology*, ed. G. K. and S. K. Hunter (Baltimore, 1969), p. 299.

⁵ Heilman, *This Great Stage: Image and Structure in King Lear* (Baton Rouge, 1948), pp. 41ff. et passim.

⁶ Heilman, *Great Stage*, p.44.

⁷ Heilman, *Great Stage*, p. 50.

⁸ Alpers, " p. 152.

⁹ In Alpers: for symbolizing, p. 140 (the storm); for moralizing (re Lear), p. 149; for condescension (re Gloucester), p. 145, for the neat paradox, p. 150. I have discussed the general problem of the difficulty of hewing to the literal in criticism in *Resistant Structures: Particularity, Radicalism, and Renaissance Texts* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1995), chs. 2 and 3.

¹⁰ For the historical point, see, *inter alia*, Lawrence Stone, *The Family, Sex and Marriage in England 1500-1800* (New York, 1977), pp. 107-113.

¹¹ There is a slight divergence between the Quarto and the Folio in the account of the military situation in III.iii. See René Weiss, ed., *King Lear: A Parallel Text Edition* (London and New York, 1993). Hereafter cited as "Weiss, ed."

¹² See Q IV.iii. 42, and the whole passage from 40-47; Weiss, ed., p. 232.

¹³ See *Hamlet*, ed. Harold Jenkins (Arden: London, 1982), pp. 503-4.

¹⁴ *Pursuits of Happiness: The Hollywood Comedy of Remarriage* (Cambridge, Mass., 1981).