Critical Response

II

On Bruns, on Cavell

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Gerald Bruns's "Stanley Cavell's Shakespeare" (*Critical Inquiry* 16 [Spring 1990]:612–32) is a consistently sympathetic and thoughtful response to Cavell's difficult essays on Shakespeare.[1] Nevertheless, while Bruns's exposition of Cavell's thought places it in a pertinently complex region of philosophical and literary concerns, it is hampered by its relative isolation from much of Cavell's other work and from certain abiding conflicts within contemporary philosophy which inform that work. The resultant misunderstandings of Cavell's thought are perhaps as inevitable as they are widespread—a function of the way in which the modern American university carves up and compartmentalizes the world of humanistic learning—and are on the verge of becoming entrenched among commentators on his work. Much of Cavell's work has been concerned (as has Bruns's, I gather) to resist some of the costs of this process of compartmentalization or professionalization. The problems this resistance poses for the reception of the work are perhaps nowhere more pervasive than in the case of Cavell's collection of essays on Shakespeare, *Disowning Knowledge in Six Plays of Shakespeare,* in part because of Cavell's sense of the figure of Shakespeare, of what this cor-

I am indebted to a conversation with Arata Hamawaki, and to comments on a previous draft of this essay by Steven Affeldt, Arnold Davidson, and Martin Stone.

1. The only other equally sympathetic yet comparably probing response that I know of is Richard P. Wheeler's essay "Acknowledging Shakespeare: Cavell and the Claim of the Human," *Bucknell Review* 32, no. 1 (1989):132–60; rept. in *The Senses of Stanley Cavell,* ed. Richard Fleming and Michael Payne (Lewisburg, Pa., 1989), pp. 132–60.

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pus of writing represents. In light of, and in appreciation of, Bruns's serious and resourceful effort to get Cavell's thought on these matters straight, it is worth trying to get it clearer.

On the second page of the introduction to his book, Cavell writes:

> 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 . . . unless his writing is engaging the depth of the philosophical preoccupations of his culture.[2]

His perplexity is understandable: the suggestion that Shakespeare's text should make a claim on us as *philosophy* is one that addicts of philosophy and adepts of literature will each have their reasons for resisting. The situation is not helped by the fact that in our contemporary English-speaking intellectual culture there has been little fruitful exchange between those engaged in the study of literary texts and those well-versed in the current of thought dominant in Anglo-American philosophy. This institutional fact is itself a symptom of a deeper schism: the mutual shunning of the Continental and Anglo-American traditions of philosophy. Having been turned out of departments of philosophy, the orphaned classics of the Continental tradition have been offered a home, in this country, primarily in departments of literature. The standard way of distinguishing these two traditions of philosophy is in terms of their historical lineage, tracing each back, through G. W. F. Hegel and Gottlob Frege respectively, to their initial point of divergence in the nineteenth-century inheritance of the Kantian legacy. For our present purposes, a more pertinent (though admittedly equally crude) way of distinguishing them would be to note that the Anglo-American tradition prefers to conceive of philosophy as a series of problems (and sometimes even puzzles), each in search of (something which, for lack of a better word, you might call) a "solution"; whereas the Continental tradition prefers to conceive of philosophy as a series of texts, each in search of (something which, for lack of a better word, you might call) a "reading." This is not to deny that each of these traditions has its uses for the respective sorts of virtues cultivated by the disciplines of reasoned argument, on the one hand, and textual interpretation, on the other. Each tradition, however, is inclined to regard the

2. Stanley Cavell, *Disowning Knowledge in Six Plays by Shakespeare* (Cambridge, 1987), p. 2; hereafter abbreviated *DK*.

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devotees of the other as being relatively uncultivated in virtues of the one sort, while refining those of the other into a bizarre (and hence undisciplined) form of vice. The result is that neither tradition is able to recognize (and therefore respect) the other's conception of rigor.

When one considers the sort of sustained pressure to which Cavell subjects Shakespeare's text, it is hardly surprising that Bruns finds it natural to place him in the company of Continental figures such as Hans-Georg Gadamer and Emmanuel Levinas. Indeed, Bruns begins his article by characterizing Cavell as someone who undertakes "a reopening of the quarrel between philosophy and poetry," and "who, alone perhaps with Martin Heidegger, has a sense of what is at stake in this quarrel" (p. 612).[3] It is therefore, above all, to a conversation carried on by philosophers on the European continent that Bruns understands Cavell to contribute. Insofar as Cavell's studies of Shakespeare (along with Bruns's exposition of them) can be seen as advancing some conversation conducted in the English-speaking world, it is evidently to a conversation carried on in departments devoted to the reception of Continental thought—which is to say, for the most part, departments officially committed to the study of literature and literary theory. There appears therefore to be, at least as far as *institutional* audience is concerned, a sense in which Bruns does

3. At the end of his article, Bruns notes that "at the end of his essay on Othello . . . Cavell asks whether philosophy can become literature 'and still know itself.'" Bruns explains: "It is not as if Cavell were levelling the 'genre difference between philosophy and literature'; rather it is as if literature and philosophy were changing places" (p. 631). Though I do not pretend to understand what Bruns means by literature and philosophy changing places, it at least suggests that he shares with certain other literary-minded enthusiasts of Cavell's work a pair of assumptions: that Cavell knows what he thinks the answer to his question (can philosophy become literature and still know itself?) is, and furthermore that he thinks it is: Yes! Both of these assumptions are responsible for a good deal of misunderstanding. Cavell himself attempts to allay this way of hearing his closing question:

> Since my question about philosophy knowing itself is what gets called a rhetorical one, it betokens both that I claim to know the answer and at the same time that I want the reader's, the other's, answer, as if unless we are in agreement in the answer I do not have it. Ending this way I would like to imagine myself keeping a question in place, or alive, say it is the question, What keeps philosophy alive? . . . I want the end to be right enough so that the guilty conscience would turn around and the reader would have to ask himself or herself, "Do I know what philosophy can—and cannot—do?" ["A Conversation with Stanley Cavell on Philosophy and Literature," *Bucknell Review* 32, no. 1 (1989):313–14; rept. in *The Senses of Stanley Cavell,* pp. 313–14]

This speaks to what is misguided in Bruns's remark that Cavell is undertaking "a reopening of the quarrel between philosophy and poetry." In the English-speaking world at least, some kind of quarrel is precisely what we, at the very most, have already got. In pressing his closing question as a *question,* Cavell is as interested in having philosophy discover and respect its specific differences from literature as he is in encouraging philosophy to discover the extent to which it (perhaps to its horror) partakes of the condition of literature.

not fully share Cavell's perplexity as to how to answer the question: to whom is this book addressed and among whom will it be received? Bruns appears to imagine he can finesse the indebtedness of these studies to conversations that have been conducted in the Anglo-American philosophical community.

It is true that philosophers of an Anglo-Saxon temperament have not generally been prepared to find *philosophical* instruction in a work of literature. This is tied to their commitment to a particular paradigm of philosophical rigor—one in which the role of argument is accorded pride of place. It will be readily conceded by them that Shakespeare's corpus can serve as a fertile repository of wisdom, brimming with psychological insights, excruciating moral dilemmas, and well-turned phrases. However, the specific form of (fully rational) conviction, which it is the work of philosophy to elicit, will have to await the subjection of these (raw) materials to the discipline of reason. Cavell remarks on the fatefulness of these cultural facts for the place accorded to Shakespeare in the English-speaking world:

> English philosophy is characterized, in distinction from, say, that of France and of Germany, by its relative distance from the major literature of its culture. Compared with Kant's or Hegel's or Schelling's awareness of Goethe or Hölderlin (or Rousseau or Shakespeare) or with Descartes's and Pascal's awareness of Montaigne, Locke's or Hume's or Mill's relation to Shakespeare and Milton or Coleridge (or Montaigne) amounts to hardly more than that to more or less serious hobbies, not to the recognition of intellectual competitors, fellow challengers of intellectual conscience. [*DK*, p. 2]

What is a relatively recent cultural phenomenon in the English-speaking world is the widespread appearance of the converse form of illiteracy: Whereas John Milton or Alexander Pope or S. T. Coleridge or Matthew Arnold or George Eliot or T. S. Eliot or Virginia Woolf were steeped in the philosophical thought of their culture, contemporary students and theorists of literature in this country are steeped almost exclusively in the philosophical culture of France and of Germany. This presents Bruns, in wishing to bring Cavell's tidings to the world of Shakespeare scholarship, with a predicament—one whose formidableness, as far as I can surmise, he underestimates—namely how to speak (and how to listen) across these cultural and institutional divides.

Thus, when Bruns deploys the term *philosophy* he generally takes it to denote a tradition of thought that finds its contemporary realization in the writings of Continental philosophers such as Martin Heidegger, Gadamer, and Levinas. When Cavell deploys the term it is from within a struggle to achieve a perspective from which Continental and Anglo-American philosophy can *each* be understood to have a legitimate claim to

inherit the calling of philosophy. It is not that Bruns denies that what happens in American philosophy departments is philosophy, but that the question is not—for many and good reasons—vital for him. Whereas the question what "philosophy" denotes (even in its most literal inflection, that is, which, what sorts of, texts?) pervades Cavell's work. In an age in which the aspiration to philosophy is divided against itself—in which the claim to inherit the philosophical calling remains contested by these two traditions of thought—Cavell's interest in the question of philosophy's affinities with (and differences from) literature is a function of his companion interest in another question: What is philosophy, and who is in a position to speak in its name?

Bruns indicates, at the outset of his article, that Cavell himself understands his project to be, above all, one of (in Bruns's own paraphrase of Cavell) trying "to open a path beyond, or through, the ordinary language philosophy of the later Ludwig Wittgenstein and J. L. Austin" (pp. 612–13)—a path, that is, through various avenues of Anglo-American philosophical thought. This registers, quite correctly, that Cavell takes himself to have uncovered in Shakespearean tragedy an exploration of the problem of skepticism that is able to both compliment and supplement the discussion advanced in the work of the later Wittgenstein and Austin. Bruns is consequently sensitive to the fact that some fairly involved story about skepticism informs Cavell's perspective on Shakespeare, and hence that a central burden of his own article must be to provide a serviceable gloss of that story. But what Bruns goes on to say in his synopsis of these matters affords too little sense of what it might mean "to open a path beyond, or through, the ordinary language philosophy of the later Ludwig Wittgenstein and J. L. Austin." Indeed, one of my purposes in what follows will be to suggest that the theses Bruns attributes to Cavell are to be seen (at least by Cavell's lights) as pre-Wittgensteinian.

To begin with, it is worth noting that in Cavell's own parlance the term *skepticism* ranges over a much wider intellectual landscape than in its conventional usage. For Cavell, it names a particular picture of knowledge (rather than some particular philosophical "position")—where *picture* is itself a term of criticism drawn from Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations*—one which expresses a natural human disappointment with the reach of knowledge.[4] This picture is seen to inform not only the classical form of philosophical despair over the possibility of knowledge (conventionally known as "skepticism"), but equally the various classical (and often mutually opposed) strategies of allaying that despair (such as rationalism

4. "A *picture* held us captive. And we could not get outside it, for it lay in our language and language seemed to repeat it to us inexorably" (Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, 3d ed., trans. G. E. M. Anscombe [New York, 1958], § 115).

and empiricism, foundationalism and coherentism, and so on).[5] The point of this unconventional usage is to underscore a guiding thought of Wittgenstein's and of Austin's, namely, that the position of the skeptic and that of the antiskeptic are stamped by a shared set of preoccupations, each bearing the mark of the other, locked together in a dialectic of insistence and counterinsistence. The specific contribution of Wittgenstein, for Cavell, lies in his attempt not to take sides in this struggle, but rather to investigate what sets it off, in the thought that an understanding of what fuels the compulsion to insist on such matters (matters that Austin and Wittgenstein both call "philosophy") holds the secret to relieving the compulsion itself. Hence Wittgenstein will compare what he does to therapy. To some this will seem to inherit and rejuvenate some of the most ancient and honorable motivations to philosophy (for example, to set the soul in order); to others it will seem a betrayal (an abdication of the philosopher's duty to search for the answers).

Bruns's Cavell takes sides. Skepticism's picture of our confinement within our own skins, our debarment from a certain ideal of knowledge, is reaffirmed and reinforced by Bruns's Cavell, rather than diagnosed and defused in the manner of Cavell's Wittgenstein.

The esoteric character of Cavell's text goes with what, for Cavell, Wittgenstein's treatment of skepticism aims to reveal about the philosopher in each of us: our proclivity to speak "outside language games,"[6] the tenacity of our conviction that the words which give voice to our philosophical discoveries amount to assertions, hence the strange obsessiveness

5. "I do not, that is, confine the term [*skepticism*] to philosophers who wind up denying that we can ever know; I apply it to any view which takes the existence of the world to be a problem of knowledge" (Cavell, *The Claim of Reason: Wittgenstein, Skepticism, Morality, and Tragedy* [Oxford, 1982], p. 46; hereafter abbreviated *CR*).

6. The phrase "outside language games" is a gloss on *Philosophical Investigations*, § 47, 116. The most synoptic passage in Cavell with respect to these matters is perhaps the following (though see also *CR*, pp. 224, 226):

> Wittgenstein's motive (and this much is shared by Austin) is to put the human animal back into language and therewith back into philosophy. But he never, I think, underestimated the power of the motive to reject the human: nothing could be more human. He undertook, as I read him, to trace the mechanisms of this rejection in the ways in which, in investigating ourselves, we are led to speak "outside language games", consider expressions apart from, and in opposition to, the natural forms of life which give those expressions the force they have. (The emphasis on diagnosis is not shared by Austin, who is in this respect, as in others, a more Enlightenment, or anyway English, figure.) What is left out of an expression if it is used "outside its ordinary language game" is not necessarily what the *words* mean . . . , but what we mean in using them when and where we do. The point of saying them is lost.
>
> And how great a loss *is* that? To show how great is a dominant motive of the *Investigations*. . . . What we lose is a full realization of what we are saying; we no longer know what *we* mean. [*CR*, p. 207]

It is in passages such as this that Cavell indicates the direction of the path he wishes to pursue "through the ordinary language philosophy of the later Ludwig Wittgenstein and J. L. Austin"—a path which Bruns names but fails to locate.

in philosophy's relation to language: that, under the pressure of taking philosophical thought, we are recurrently "prompted to insistent emptiness, to mean something incoherently" (*CR*, p. 336). Bruns's insufficient attention to Cavell's interest in such (are we to call them "linguistic"?) matters leads him to mistake the spirit and tone in which many of Cavell's remarks are made. The formulas Bruns extracts from Cavell's prose and exhibits as conclusions are, by and large, intended by Cavell to register not theses, but rather temptations (which drive us deep into the philosophical waters in which we generally find ourselves, swimming about). The ultimate destination of Wittgenstein's investigations into our tendency to speak emptily, the uncovering of our way into philosophy, functions in Cavell's work on Shakespeare as a point of departure for urging further questions: What fuels our philosophical insistence? What form of dissatisfaction is displaced in our preoccupation with a dissatisfaction with knowledge?

Bruns announces the project of his article in the following terms:

> What Cavell finds in these plays is an attempt to think through what elsewhere, in the formation of the modern philosophical tradition, was getting formulated as the problem of skepticism, or not being able to know that we know (not being able to be certain).[7] It is not easy to say what this means. As if executing a skeptical decorum, Cavell's writing does not try for transparency. . . . Without claiming to match Cavell's views point for point, I would like to give something like a para-Cavellian commentary that tries to say what his thinking, with respect to Shakespeare, seems to be getting at, and also where it leaves us. [Pp. 613–14]

If Bruns's summary of Cavell's thought is accurate, then he is of course justified in saying that "Cavell's writing does not try for transparency" and that it requires something like a "commentary that tries to say what his thinking . . . seems to be getting at." But why ignore the alternative possibility that Cavell does mean to be at least *aiming* at (and therefore also inheriting philosophy's time-honored aspiration to) transparency?[8] Bruns's neglect of this possibility is all the more surprising given some of

7. The relevant "problem of skepticism" for Cavell is not happily summarized as merely one of second-order knowledge—that is, one of not being able to know that we know. It is rather, quite simply and generally, one of *knowledge*—that is, one of (not) being able to ("really") *know* (anything).

8. What is objectionable is not the (undeniable) thought that Cavell's work is difficult and, in some sense, esoteric; rather it is Bruns's insinuation concerning what the esotericism comes to in Cavell's own eyes: the idea that the writing actively *seeks* to exclude by being intentionally obscure, by keeping secrets from its readers. This is regrettable particularly in light of the central role that this topic (the difficulty of philosophy, the sources of its esotericism) occupies throughout Cavell's work, beginning already with his earliest essays on Austin and Wittgenstein (now collected as the opening chapters of *Must We Mean What We Say? A Book of Essays* [1969; Cambridge, 1976]).

the other preoccupations of his article: namely, his affection for Cavell's eloquence concerning the tendency of commentators (on, say, *King Lear*, or *Philosophical Investigations*) to jump to the conclusion that an author is needlessly sloppy or obscure in his mode of presentation, rather than to risk themselves on the gamble that (in these depths at least) perhaps this *is* the form the author requires: that each mark has been measured, that the text is as clear as it *can* be. What is at issue for Cavell here, as elsewhere, is our habits of reading: our willingness to abandon an antecedent conviction in the *depth* of a work—our willingness to assume a posture of condescension towards it—rather than compromise our antecedent conception of the form that the achievement of enlightenment is obliged to assume.

Bruns's "para-Cavellian commentary" begins by trying to say what Cavell's discussion of the relation between René Descartes's and Othello's doubt "seems to be getting at":

> The difference between them is perhaps that Descartes's doubt is comic. It is a methodical skepticism that emancipates him, or part of him, from the burden of learning, that is, from the weight, or blockage, of paternity—the patrimony of Aristotle, for example, or indeed the whole Western philosophical tradition, with its endless, tormented school-rehearsals and ecclesiastical controversies. Whereas Othello's doubt is, philosophically, something else, something closer to, made of the stuff of, skepticism itself. [P. 614]

Bruns places himself in sound scholarly company in endorsing a reading that puts the accent on the "methodical," or strategic, character of Descartes's skepticism. On such a reading, the interest of the skepticism advanced in the *First Meditation* is confined to its methodological role as a heuristic that undercuts the prejudices of the Aristotelian establishment and clears the way for the new science. Skepticism in Descartes is a *method* of doubt and that is all it is, thus some very respectable scholars have insisted. What is astonishing is that Bruns should take *this* to be the Descartes who preoccupies Cavell—the man who Cavell (along with a lot of other people) views as having bequeathed to us the classical formulation of the skeptical dilemma: the worry that no finite human being is equipped with the resources to attain knowledge (or community) without the mediation of an infinite (and supremely benevolent) being. For Cavell, this is not only a worry that continues to exercise its fascination for us long after the decline of neo-Aristotelianism, but also one that is centrally under investigation in Shakespearean tragedy. One can, nevertheless, imagine the interest such an insistence on the purely instrumental and historically contingent character of Descartes's doubt might hold for Cavell (in the way that various pieces of scholarly wisdom about *Lear*, or the *Philosophical Investigations*, have also interested him). He might urge questions such as the following: Wherefore our insistence here? What, in its fervent

denial, does such a reading of Descartes's *Meditations* seek to evade? What does our attraction to such a reading enable the text to reveal about us? Such questions will not be to everyone's taste.

Despite its note of condescension towards Descartes, this passage by Bruns strikes a true note, one which is of importance to Cavell: Descartes's doubt, when viewed from the standpoint of how we ordinarily speak (the kinds of doubts we ordinarily entertain) *can* strike us as comic. The dimension of ludicrousness in Descartes's doubt that preoccupies Cavell derives, however, not from its strategic or methodical but rather from its precipitous and hyperbolic character. This dimension does not furnish him with the terms for a contrast between the comedy of Descartes and the tragedy of Othello. This is not only because the hyperbole and precipitousness of Othello's doubt (if it does not strike us as monstrous) may, at any moment, strike us as ludicrous; but, more important, because this aspect of Descartes's doubt, its excessiveness, compels him to raise the question of his own madness, thereby inaugurating for Cavell a defining theme of the modern philosophical tradition: one in which

> philosophy's commitment to reason is something that inherently forces it to face the possibility of madness. I go no further than to cite you the cases of Descartes, of Hume, and of Kant, who seem to be quite aware of these two features of reason—that reason is motivated by a sense of antireason, which can take the form of a kind of madness, and also that reason itself might become, allow itself to become, a form of madness, that what philosophy has to do is to use reason to correct itself. One of my favorite insights in Kant, one of the achievements that seems most astounding to me, is his actual systematizing of various forms of reason itself gone mad.... So that what Wittgenstein calls the bewitchment of the mind by language seems to me to join a central philosophical tradition of worrying about reason uncontrolled, turning into its opposite.[9]

It is such a tradition that Cavell also sees Shakespeare joining. The violence in Descartes's doubt—its (self-consuming) precipitousness and its (world-annihilating) hyperbole, its affinities with reason out of control and turning into its opposite, its inner kinship with hysteria and madness—is what, for Cavell, permits its identification as the central subject of Shakespearean tragedy.

Bruns goes astray when he declares in Cavell's name: "Othello's doubt is, philosophically, *something else* [than Descartes's], something closer to, made of the stuff of, skepticism itself" (p. 614; my emphasis).

9. James Conant, "An Interview with Stanley Cavell," *Bucknell Review* 32, no. 1 (1989): 57–58; rept. in *The Senses of Stanley Cavell*, pp. 57–58.

Cavell goes out of his way to reassure his reader that he fully means his surprising claim that Shakespeare and Descartes are concerned to stake out the same philosophical territory:

> My intuition is that the advent of skepticism as manifested in Descartes's *Meditations* is already in full existence in Shakespeare. . . . The skeptical problematic I have in mind is given its philosophical refinement in Descartes's way of raising the question of God's existence and of the immortality of the soul. . . . The issue posed is no longer, or not alone, as with earlier skepticism, how to conduct oneself best in an uncertain world; the issue suggested is how to live at all in a groundless world. Our skepticism is a function of our now illimitable desire. [*DK*, p. 3]

There is a further irony in Bruns's conviction in the irrelevance of "the whole Western philosophical tradition, with its endless, tormented school-rehearsals" to an understanding of the nature of Othello's doubt.[10] For his account of Othello faithfully rehearses a tormented school-problem known to analytic philosophers as skepticism concerning other minds. The skeptic of other minds is the fellow in philosophical journal articles and introductory textbooks who allows himself to be struck by some version of the following thought: we can't feel what another person feels; and who then goes on to argue that our inability to ("directly") know (what is "really" going on in) the mind of another person (the way *he* or *she*

10. There is an interesting parallel here between Bruns's and Richard Rorty's respective perceptions of Cavell's work. They share a sense that Cavell opens up certain possibilities for philosophical reflection by disengaging them from the "endless, tormented school-rehearsals" of the "Western philosophical tradition." Whereas Bruns takes such a project of disengagement to be celebrated in Cavell's work, Rorty detects a reluctance on Cavell's part—one which is epitomized, for Rorty, by Cavell's remark (in the preface to *The Claim of Reason*) that he wishes to keep "lines open to the events with American academic philosophical life" (*CR*, p. xiv). Rorty, nevertheless, shares with Bruns the assumption that what is most exciting in Cavell's work must stand in tension with a serious interest in whatever is at issue in the usual "textbook" rehearsals of "fashionable [American] philosophy departments." Hence Rorty admonishes: "Such parochial matters should not concern Cavell. . . . One would have expected him to conclude that Wittgenstein would be better served by *forgetting* 'events within American philosophical life' than by recapturing them" (Richard Rorty, *Consequences of Pragmatism*, [Minneapolis, 1982], p. 178). This involves an idea utterly foreign to (Cavell's) Wittgenstein: namely, the idea that a philosophical problem is something one *can* get free of by resolving to "forget," or dismiss, it. This misses not only what Wittgenstein calls "the character of *depth*" such problems have (their rootedness: "They are deep disquietudes; their roots are as deep in us as the forms of our language" [Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, § 111]), but also part of the point of his analogy with therapy: namely, that our preferred strategy for evading such problems (say, through repression, or denial) simply leads to a return of the repressed in the form of a proliferation of secondary symptoms. If the roots of a temptation's attraction remain unexcavated, then, in dismissing it, rather than getting free of it, we remain pervasively, and (to ourselves) invisibly, controlled by it.

knows it) debars us from ever attaining (genuine, true, real) knowledge of (what is going on in) another mind. Othello is such a fellow:

> What Othello wants to possess, and can never have (cannot in the nature of the case, because he is human) is Desdemona'a own self-certainty of her fidelity, that is, her own self-experience of her love for him. . . . We can imagine that Desdemona has no doubt, call it a Cartesian certainty, of her faithfulness to Othello. This is the knowledge that Othello desires, what he is jealous of: he wants to not-doubt Desdemona as she not-doubts herself. [P. 614][11]

Cavell's reading of the play does indeed rest on seeing Othello's doubt as an enactment of skepticism of other minds. Bruns seems to take Cavell's view to be that the play simply presents us with such an enactment—a mere depiction of skeptical pathos—as if all the play could provide (just as an analytic philosopher of a certain traditional stripe would expect) were an illustration, a dramatization, of skepticism in action. No path through (let alone beyond) the work of the later Wittgenstein is envisaged here; no potential for therapeutic insight—insight into, say, how the skeptic's (in this case, Othello's) picture of knowledge can be seen to come apart (how he is driven to insist emptily), or what fuels his attraction to such a picture (the wellsprings of his appetite for knowledge); or what might satisfy his craving (what would bring him the peace the Wittgenstein says it is philosophy's business to bring).[12]

11. Bruns goes on to add: "as Descartes could not-doubt his own existence." I have tried to step around this tendency in Bruns's discussion to run together issues concerning one's knowledge of one's own (or another's) mind with issues concerning one's knowledge of one's own (or another's) existence. Bruns tends to conflate a doubt about Desdemona's feelings of faithfulness (which she cannot doubt) with a doubt about her existence (which she also cannot doubt). For Cavell, at least in the beginning, it is important to try to tease these two matters apart. Indeed, as he points out (see *CR*, p. 426), the former sort of doubt actually excludes the latter: If the knowledge I want is the kind only the other has, then the other must exist! In fact, it is never a question of *whether* Desdemona exists for Othello that is at issue for Cavell: "Nothing could be more certain to Othello than that Desdemona exists; is flesh and blood; is separate from him; other. This is precisely the possibility that tortures him" (*DK*, p. 138). The issue of existence comes up for Cavell, rather, in the form of the question what it *means* to know "that another exists":

> But Othello certainly knows that Desdemona exists! So what has his more or less interesting condition to do with skepticism?—In what spirit do you ask that question? I too am raising it. I wish to keep suspicion cast on what it is we take to express skepticism, and here especially by casting suspicion on whether we know what it means to know that another exists. [*DK*, pp. 137–38]

One way to summarize my central complaint about Bruns's exposition is to say that he does not keep suspicion cast on what such questions might mean, but rather proceeds as if it were perfectly clear for Cavell what sense they might make.

12. See, for example, Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, § 133.

Bruns presents the skeptic's picture of what can count as knowledge of another mind as if it could stand for Cavell as a thesis: "knowing occurs in the intimacy of self-experience" (p. 614).[13] Bruns's inclination to assume that Cavell wishes to assert some form of a skeptical thesis derives in part from the way he takes the following passage (which he quotes [p. 616] and borrows from, or paraphrases, at a number of other points): "The moral of skepticism [is], namely, that the human creature's basis in the world as a whole, its relation to the world as such, is not that of knowing, anyway not what we think of as knowing" (*CR*, p. 241). Bruns interprets Cavell's claim here as (what would amount in Cavell's eyes to) an affirmation of the skeptic's picture of our relation to the world. This misses Cavell's suggestion that our (ordinary) concept of knowledge cannot find a natural foothold here (in relation to "the world as such"), that there is no obvious ordinary sense to be made of our words *know* and *world* here. Bruns hears the remark as (not: our relation is "not *that* of knowing" but rather as) our relation is one of *not knowing*. He hears in it an assertion concerning a failure of knowledge (our not being *able* to satisfy some coherent wish to know) rather than a failure of sense (our not being able to find a use for our concept of knowing here). Hence Bruns collapses Cavell's "moral" back into a straightforwardly skeptical assertion: "There is no making the world present to oneself, it always exceeds one's grasp" (p. 616). According to Bruns, Wittgenstein and Heidegger,[14] and now

13. This leaves firmly in place skepticism's conception of our relation to our own private states, incorporating all the central features of this conception: that this relation is aptly characterized in general as one knowledge, that it presents a paradigm of what knowing a mind is, that the species of knowledge it delivers is immediate and incorrigible, that our knowledge of the Other pales in contrast, and so on. Hence, Bruns will summarize Cavell's view of Shakespearean tragedy in the following terms: "What is it to find . . . one's own self-intimacy, unendurable? Shakespeare's tragic heroes know" (p. 615).

In my diagnosis here of Bruns's various misunderstandings of Cavell, I credit Bruns with having skepticism's conception of our knowledge of others in focus. However, there are moments when things seem to go quite far out of focus and I'm no longer sure what Bruns's take on Cavell is. For example, the phrase to which this footnote is appended occurs in a sentence that equates this skeptical thought with two other matters: (1) "Jealousy, on this line of thinking, becomes the condition of skepticism"—Now this seems to pry jealousy and skepticism too far apart for Cavell's purposes. Compare: "What philosophy knows as doubt, Othello's violence allegorizes (or recognizes) as some form of jealousy" (*DK*, p. 7). (2) "Not having the world present to us in the way of knowing"—This runs together Cavell's respective discussions of other-minds and external-world skepticism, a confusion that, as we shall see, pervades Bruns's whole exposition.

14. Although I fully share Bruns's conviction that there are striking points of contact between Cavell's and Heidegger's thought, I include Heidegger here to register my sense that Bruns's readings of Cavell and Heidegger seem to misfire in parallel ways. Heidegger's discussions of the "worldhood" (or the "nearness") of the world seem, to my ear, to be equally in service, not of affirming a skeptical perception (concerning how the world exceeds or eludes the grasp of knowledge), but rather of problematizing the skeptic's sense that the world as such is something that can be coherently nominated as a candidate for knowledge. Heidegger anticipates Wittgenstein's perception that, in the course of the clas-

Cavell himself, bring us the news (which one would have thought the skeptic had been trying to pass along to us for centuries) that our desire for knowledge runs up against a metaphysical barrier. What frustrates the skeptic's demand is (just what he thought): the presence of *limit.*

> The truth of skepticism, as Cavell thinks of it. . . . is rather that the skeptic's desire for certainty with respect to the world drives him . . . to strip away illusion after illusion, account after metaphysical account, until he reaches, not bedrock, as Descartes thought, and certainly not the world, which, like Justice, or Heidegger's earth, steadily withdraws itself before the would-be knower's grasp, but the limits . . . of the human. [P. 616]

The word *limits* recurs repeatedly hereafter in Bruns's exposition. His sense of its appropriateness seems to derive in part from his misunderstanding of and reliance on another remark, drawn from a different region of Cavell's thought. "Cavell answers that we have got to 'live our skepticism' (*CR*, p. 440) in order to get the sense or point of it, that is, in order to get a sense of what our relation to the world comes to" (p. 616). The passage Bruns quotes from here occurs in the middle of a treatment of other-minds skepticism. Bruns runs together Cavell's respective discussions of external-world and other-minds skepticism, missing the thrust of what Cavell calls the "asymmetry" between the two (see *CR*, pp. 451–54). It is easy to miss the thrust: the claim of such an asymmetry is meant to counter an ingrained tendency of philosophy. Transplanting Cavell's remark to a different context, Bruns takes Cavell to be suggesting that the idea of "living our skepticism" with respect to the external world is not only fully intelligible (as well as practically possible), but, furthermore, in some sense, actually advisable. In this passage, Cavell, however, is concerned explicitly and exclusively with exploring what he takes to be a *distinctive* feature of other-minds skepticism: namely, that there does seem to be something (with respect to this variety of skepticism) we can count as "living our skepticism." His point is, regarding the sense he is able to make of these words, (not, as Bruns says, "that we have got to" but rather) that we generally (and unfortunately) do "live our skepticism" with respect to other minds. (This remark is forwarded not as an endorsement, but rather as part of a diagnosis, of our temptation to solipsism in both its theoretical

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sical skeptical rehearsal, the concept of knowledge becomes unmoored from the "surroundings" (a favorite word of both philosophers) that are its natural "home" (another favorite word) and permitted to drift into a context in which it no longer has any clear and familiar sense. An abiding concern to investigate both how and why, under the pressure of philosophizing, our attempts to bring our everyday lives into imagination (our attempts, if you will, at "phenomenology") thus drift so far astray constitutes one of the deepest bonds between these two thinkers.

and practical aspects.) With respect to the case of the external world, on the other hand (indeed, this is a critical aspect of the asymmetry), Cavell goes to impressive lengths (much earlier in *The Claim of Reason*) to show that we have no clear sense of what it might mean (rather than what Descartes and Hume suggest, namely, that it is simply humanly impossible) for us to "live our skepticism."[15] Insofar as skepticism concerning other minds can be "lived"—does admit of a translation into practice—a philosopher of a certain sort might wish to conclude that it therefore does not qualify as a genuine species of skepticism. Hence Cavell's suggestion, which undergoes considerable elaboration in his work on Shakespeare, that "skepticism concerning other minds is not skepticism but is tragedy" (*CR*, p. xix).

Bruns performs the opposite conflation as well, importing a remark of Cavell's (from *CR*, p. 241, quoted above) concerning external-world skepticism into the context of a discussion of other-minds skepticism.[16] Bruns concludes: "Our relation to . . . the Other, is not one of knowing" (p. 620),[17] hearing this again as a declaration of an inability to know; reading Cavell as again willing to settle with skepticism's sense of our demand for knowledge (in this case, of another mind) as meeting with frustration,

15. Indeed, so far as I know, no philosopher since the time of Descartes, until Bruns's Cavell, that is, has actually gone so far as to recommend that we should try to put skepticism with respect to the external world into practice! (The ancient skeptics, of course, did teach that one should try to live one's skepticism. However, their skepticism was importantly pre-Cartesian in its conception of the line between inner and outer: doubt was directed towards what was external to the human *body*, rather than towards everything, including therefore one's own body, which is external to the mind.) Throughout the modern period, the idea of trying to make one's skepticism a practical affair has been consistently rejected as humanly impossible.

16. Bruns also imports his reading of this remark of Cavell's (concerning "the moral of skepticism") into contexts that, as far as I can tell, are simply of his own invention. Hence he attributes to Cavell, for example, the enigmatic claim that "our relationship to Justice is not one of knowing" (p. 616).

17. Bruns actually offers this as a gloss of the following passage of Levinas's, one which he takes to be marking a Cavellian point: "The expression the face introduces into the world does not defy the feebleness of my powers, but my ability for power" (Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, trans. Alphonso Lingis [Pittsburgh, 1969]; p. 198). Bruns summarizes the point as follows: "In Cavell's language, the face situates us in the condition of the skeptic" (p. 620). I, again, share Bruns's sense of a parallel here and I, again, feel his exposition of it misfires in a similar fashion: namely, by flattening a formulation that aims to problematize the terms in which the skeptic poses his question into one that simply reaffirms those terms. The phrase "my ability for power" translates Levinas's "mon pouvoir de pouvoir." This doubling of the modal operator signals Levinas's attempt to tunnel underneath the classical epistemological model of our knowledge of another. The point is not to register an inability, a petering out, on the part of knowledge, but rather an inability on the part of such concepts ("categories") to gain a foothold here: I am not able to be either able or unable (to know, epistemologically possess, the Other). This doubling of the verb *pouvoir* pervades Levinas's prose, everywhere in service of a similar

running up against (something pictured as) a limit: "What Cavell understands, of course, are just those hermeneutical limits[18] that Othello doesn't see, refuses to be bound by: limits imposed by the otherness of Desdemona and the claim this carries" (p. 621). This seems to have things inside out. What Othello does see (and does feel bound by) is what he experiences as Desdemona's separateness—if you like, "limits imposed by the otherness of Desdemona"—limits that frustrate his craving for knowl-

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concern. (Hence, for example, his "je ne peu pouvoir" is perhaps more happily rendered in English as "I am not able to be able," rather than as "I can have no power"; see Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, p. 236.) Levinas goes on to remark (p. 198) that any effort to close (what is imagined here as) the gap between myself and the Other can only proceed in the direction of killing the Other, which will still leave my desire for intimacy unfulfilled. The point is not that I have a coherent demand here that must go unfulfilled—"situating me in the condition of the skeptic"—but rather that there is no coherent demand that I am either able or unable to fulfill.

For a development of various related parallels between Levinas and Cavell, see Arnold I. Davidson's "Questions Concerning Heidegger: Opening the Debate," *Critical Inquiry* 15 (Winter 1989): 424–25.

18. Bruns here, and elsewhere, tangles up issues concerning a skeptical picture of the "limits of knowledge" with what he calls "hermeneutical limits"—borrowing a notion of Gadamer's that he claims to find in Cavell. Nonetheless, the parallel that Bruns develops later on in the essay between Gadamer and Cavell is suggestive:

> Cavell has tried to suggest that . . . we cannot claim to have read a text, understood and interpreted it, unless we can say how it has read us, that is, unpacked us, laid us bare, opened us to critical scrutiny, that is, to a questioning to which we cannot adequately respond without being altered in some fundamental way. Gadamer calls this having a "hermeneutical experience," in which the encounter with the text subjects us to a dialectical reversal, a radical restructuring of our self-understanding that "always involves an escape from something that had deceived us and held us captive." Like Gadamer, Cavell wants to understand this condition of being read as redemptive or therapeutic, that is, emancipatory, releasing us from some species of mental bondage. [P. 630]

I do not wish to deny that there is a great deal to this parallel. In particular the passage Bruns quotes here from Gadamer about escaping from something that holds us captive (see Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 2d ed., trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald Marshall [New York, 1989], p. 356) is strikingly reminiscent of *Philosophical Investigations*, § 115 (see footnote 4 above), clearly echoing an aspect of Wittgenstein's thought on which Cavell wishes to build. Nevertheless (though those who know Gadamer better may wish to set me straight here), the assimilation of (what interests Cavell) in the therapeutic dimension of the "condition of being read" with (what interests Gadamer in) the "hermeneutical experience" seems to me to drain some of the specificity of the analogy with therapy out of Cavell's original perception: Gadamer is interested in what deceives us, Cavell in how we deceive ourselves—that is, in what we can't help but know (but, nevertheless, deny) rather than what we simply do not (yet) know. It is roughly the difference between merely obstructed and actively repressed knowledge. So Cavell's notion of allowing a text to read one's self (therapeutically) cannot be simply identified with "what Gadamer identifies as the Socratic dimension of every text that comes down to us in a tradition" (p. 631). For not any text will do, but rather only one which can be discovered to be what Emerson calls (in "Self-Reliance") a "work of genius": one that invites us to permit our own rejected thoughts to return to us.

edge. Such a portrait of Othello belongs, for Cavell, to a description of Othello's own picture of his metaphysical bind. The play, according to Cavell, however, furnishes us with resources for a roughly opposite view of matters, one that challenges Othello's own (as well as Bruns's Cavell's) interpretation of the source of Othello's sense of confinement. On this view, what Othello lacks is not knowledge. His sense of limitation is rather a cover for a refusal of knowledge: "What this man lacked was not certainty. He knew everything, but he could not yield to what he knew, be commanded by it. He found out too much for his mind, not too little" (*DK*, p. 141).

Othello's failure is one of what Cavell calls acknowledgment: "Tragedy is the place we are not allowed to escape the consequences, or price, of this cover: that the failure to acknowledge a best case of the other is a denial of that other" (*DK*, p. 138). This failure of acknowledgment is then interpreted by the philosopher in us (call him Othello) as a failure of knowledge. It is converted into an intellectual difficulty, so that its solution now appears to require a further application of the intellect: a search for more and better knowledge.

Bruns knows something important is at stake here: "On the difference, and internal connection, between knowledge and acknowledgment, Cavell stakes himself as a philosopher" (p. 619). But he converts Cavell's point into (what will count for Cavell as) a version of a skeptical thesis: "Cavell's insight, his tragic sense, is that, as with Lear, it is more than most of us can bear to acknowledge these limits. And this is because these limits bring us up against the otherness of the human" (p. 617). Throughout his article, Bruns takes the act of acknowledgment (which Othello seeks to evade) to be directed at the existence of a limit (or set of limits). What is at issue for Bruns's Cavell "is not a barrier to be overcome but a limit to be acknowledged" (p. 630).[19] This can seem hard to deny, and surely it captures something. But what Cavell says Othello fails to acknowledge is not a something (say, a limit) at all, but rather a someone (a human being), namely, Desdemona. He fails to acknowledge *her*. (His withholding of acknowledgment is tied, on Cavell's reading, to what he [somewhere] does know—that she is faithful to him, that she loves him—but cannot bear.)

19. It is worth emphasizing that at least with regard to the reception of this region of Cavell's thought, the difficulties are by no means simply attributable to the chilly relations in this country between departments of philosophy and departments of literature. Bruns's misapprehension that the grammar of Cavell's concept of acknowledgment requires it to take as its object something like "the limits of knowledge," although without textual footing, is one that equally pervades commentaries on Cavell's work written by philosophers. Paul Guyer's introduction to a festschrift for Cavell (*Pursuits of Reason: Essays in Honor of Stanley Cavell*, ed. Ted Cohen, Paul Guyer, and Hilary Putnam [Lubbock, Tex., 1990]) offers a representative instance of this tendency. With respect to this assumption (namely that the role of acknowledgment is to affirm the limits of knowledge), Guyer's reading is virtually indistinguishable from Bruns's.

So it is Othello himself who has an investment in an interpretation of his failure in terms of knowledge. His self-interpretation, in this respect, precisely mirrors that of the philosophical skeptic. However literary his features, his mind here is classically philosophical in its interpretation of the character of his disappointment, and in its investment in such an interpretation. He allows himself to be completely preoccupied by his sense of the presence of a limit—that something is sealing her out (and sealing him in).

Admittedly, there is a difference between Bruns's Cavell and Cavell's Othello. Whereas Othello is unhinged by his perception of human limitation, Bruns's Cavell urges us to adopt a stoic acquiescence in the face of our metaphysical finitude: We should humbly recognize ("acknowledge") the limits of knowledge and learn to accept them, rather than fruitlessly succumb to our inclination to chafe against them. This is a watered-down version of what Cavell understands to be Immanuel Kant's solution to the problem of skepticism—one which continues to "take the mind as *confined* in what it can know,"[20] but proposes to bring peace by clearly demarcating the limits of knowledge and affirming their existence (as necessary conditions for the possibility of knowledge). It is against such an understanding of Wittgenstein's (and his own appropriation of Wittgenstein's) treatment of skepticism that Cavell seeks to warn his reader in passages such as the following:

> The idea that what happens to the philosophic mind when it attempts speculation beyond its means, is that it transgresses something we want to call limits, is an idea that cannot as it stands constitute a serious term of criticism for Wittgenstein but must remain merely a "picture," however significant.[21]

Bruns's Cavell wishes to put considerable metaphysical weight on just such a "picture" of limits. Wittgenstein's own recurrence to the idea of limits, especially in the idea of our running up, in philosophy, against the "limits of language" is (in its later occurrences in his work) emphatically figurative, or pictorial. It does not imply (as Cavell takes Kant to) that there are fixed a priori limits that language, in order to express knowledge, is to stay within. For Wittgenstein there is no "beyond" in this sense from which we are a priori debarred.[22] It is precisely a philosophical insistence on such a picture—the drawing, as it were, of a line we cannot

20. Cavell, *Pursuits of Happiness: The Hollywood Comedy of Remarriage* (Cambridge, 1981), p. 78.

21. Ibid.

22. Cavell's views on these, as on other, issues in the interpretation of the later Wittgenstein are controversial. I myself have argued elsewhere, equally controversially, that already in the *Tractatus* Wittgenstein invokes the notion of the "limits of language" precisely in order to disillusion us with it. This notion, along with the rest of the body of the work that rests on it, is meant to come apart on the reader. The aim is to show us that our

cross—that marks for Wittgenstein the most common route into skepticism. This is a topic Cavell recurs to repeatedly: "The beginning of skepticism is the insinuation of absence, of a line, or limitation, hence the creation of want, or desire."[23] In *Disowning Knowledge,* for example, he touches on it in the following manner: "What skepticism threatens is precisely irretrievable outsideness, an uncrossable line, a position from which it is *obvious* (without argument) that the world is unknowable" (*DK,* p. 29). Part of a diagnosis of skepticism for Wittgenstein will require an excavation of the (apparently innocent) moment when such a line is first insinuated. The decisive moment in philosophy, Wittgenstein tells us, is likely to be the one that strikes us as most innocent.[24] If, in our rebuttals of skepticism, this moment (of drawing the line) remains unexcavated, we will continue to picture the satisfaction of our craving for knowledge as requiring the transgression of a limit—a transgression we now conceive of as a violation of our finitude. We come to imagine that the price of fully satisfying our yearning for knowledge would be the obliteration of our humanity —an unravelling of the very conditions that make knowledge, as we know it, possible. Cavell discusses the fatefulness of such a moment (in which we first insinuate the existence of an uncrossable line) in passages such as the following:

> The first *Critique* project[s] a *line* below which, or a circle outside which, experience, hence knowledge, cannot, and must not presume to, penetrate. Here I must appeal to the experience of those who have tried to explain Kant's work, if just to themselves; I mean to that moment at which, quite inevitably, one pictures its architectonic by actually drawing a line or a circle, closing off the region of the thing in itself. I realize that I imply, in this appeal, not merely that such a gesture is not accidental, but that so apparently trivial a sketch can control, or express, one's thinking for a long lifetime, like a Fate. [*Q,* p. 47]

One of the most evident respects in which Cavell's philosophical writing confirms its indebtedness to Wittgenstein is in its incessant concern to mark and measure the fatefulness of gestures such as this one. His writing on Shakespeare takes up this concern but places the emphasis at a different point: on the complimentary perception that such gestures are not

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picture of a limit here is as empty of content as it is attractive to us. Hence we are told, at the end of the work, that we have understood the author only when we have come to recognize what he has offered us as (plain) nonsense—only, that is, when we have overcome our attraction to it and are able to throw it away.

23. Cavell, *In Quest of the Ordinary: Lines of Skepticism and Romanticism* (Chicago, 1989), p. 51; hereafter abbreviated *Q.*

24. See Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations,* § 308.

accidental, but rather natural to us. Cavell's writing on Shakespeare follows Wittgenstein in the thought that we ourselves are the authors of such lines—that we impose a vision of confinement on ourselves—but then goes on to develop the further thought that tragedy can be understood in terms of a "working out" (*DK*, p. 5) of such gestures of self-confinement. Hence in his work on Shakespeare the following question assumes prominence: whence our investment in skepticism (in its picture of our relation to others and the world)? One way of seeing the pertinence of tragedy to the subject of skepticism is therefore to focus on the extent to which, on Wittgenstein's account, in our attraction to skepticism, it is *we* who are the authors of our own isolation. So, for Cavell, not only can tragedy be seen as the working out of skepticism, but skepticism can be seen as the playing out of tragedy: "our ordinary lives partake of tragedy in partaking of skepticism" (*Q*, p. 9).

Cavell's work on Shakespearean tragedy rests on the discovery that the inexorability of skepticism (in Cavell's broad sense of the word) derives not from the faithfulness of its depiction of the contours of human finitude, but rather from a restiveness with (a faithlessness to) that finitude—an unacceptability of that finitude to itself. Hence, Cavell's aphorism: "Nothing is more human than the wish to deny one's humanity" (*CR*, p. 109).