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Abstract Title:

Acknowledging Unknowing: Stanley Cavell and the Philosophical Criticism of Literature

Abstract:

Stanley Cavell, in *Disowning Knowledge: In Seven Plays of Shakespeare*, proposes “an epistemological reading of Shakespearean tragedy.” The book’s introduction insists on the embeddedness of Cavell’s Shakespeare interpretations in his philosophical projects: they originate as organic parts, in key cases conclusions, to his books dealing broadly with themes of philosophical skepticism.

In general, skepticism stems from a desire to know the world as God and to escape the insuperably human conditions of knowledge and responsibility. Cavell’s philosophy is about acknowledging limits to knowledge, where a blind, uncontrollable contact with others in “presentness” needs to be courageously accepted and embraced: “what we need is not more knowledge but the willingness to forgo knowing”. The absurdity of skepticism lies in its attempt to infer the existence of the world, whereas this fact is present to us not as a result of any chains of deductions but rather in the very opening of our consciousness to awareness of ourselves within a world.

The new epistemology that is formulated a generation later than Shakespeare by Descartes and affirmed in the new experimental science gives primacy to knowledge and pivots on the idea that salvation from the human plight comes through knowledge. This epistemology substitutes knowing for the presentness of the world, and this leads to the kind of tragedy that is already outlined and sifted through in *King Lear*. “If epistemology wished to make knowing a substitute for that fact [of an awareness that presentness was threatened, gone], that is scarcely foolish or knavish, and scarcely some simple mistake. It is, in fact one way to describe the tragedy *King Lear* records”. As a result, to overcome knowing as our basic posture towards the world and others turns out to be the main task confronted by Shakespeare’s protagonists. Their inability to give up knowing provokes their tragedies. Only what we do not know can save us (to play on Heidegger’s famous last words published in *Der Spiegel*).

The overcoming of epistemology in Cavell’s thinking does not perhaps contain anything that is not clearly found in Wittgenstein or even, in very different ways, in Heidegger. The language, however, is different, and the derivation of these insights from Shakespearean tragedy offers a different approach with a historical and literary perspective that could be exploited even more than it is by Cavell with his philosophical analysis. This paper will probe the different roles of philosophical and literary thinking as they work together and in tension with each other in Cavell’s writing.