

Marian Keane

Abstract Title:

Reading In: Cavell's Four Allegories of Otherness

Abstract:

The concept of otherness is at the heart of Cavell's philosophical thought and literary criticism; investigation, articulation, and interpretation of this concept or problematic prompts his criticism of literary works. Among these works, Shakespeare is prominent. Whether his readings of Emerson and Thoreau are literary criticism or philosophy is an open and real question.

There are signal occasions in Cavell's writing where he defines or specifies the work of criticism—of literature, poetry, music and film. These occasions mark junctures in his thinking about the motive, prompt, or path toward philosophy—a field, or preoccupation, that Cavell defines as “always questioning,” and opens to the rigor of self-questioning—a condition (of philosophy) brought to, or laid on, all the arts on the advent of Modernism.

The Claim of Reason sets out that embodiedness—the being, the “having of” a body—is only one part of the skeptical problematic; the other part is the soul, which allows one to know another (as a) human being.

On four occasions—two in CR, one in MWMWWS?, one in TWV—Cavell articulates and interprets the suffering and knowledge of “the Other” through literature and film (three Shakespeare texts; one film by Dreyer).

These four readings of the consequences and violences of knowledge and of the failure of knowing an other chart Cavell's consistent understanding, from the beginning of his philosophical project, of knowledge (criteria; epistemology) and otherness (metaphysics), a twinned pair that meet in language (speaking, writing, poetry; philosophy). The central concept of Cavell's contribution to, or intervention in, philosophy—hence criticism—is acknowledgement. Grounded in skepticism (the knowledge that as we stand, our disappointment in our capacity to know scars us), the concept (and reality) of acknowledgement of other(ness) is our only path to know ourselves.

I want to present a paper at your conference. My paper will investigate only four specific pieces of Cavell's criticism (King Lear, The Merchant of Venice, Othello, Joan of Arc). Each registers a different instruction of knowing (an)Other, but taken together they set out four corners of Cavell's understanding of the skeptical problematic that criticism (of literature, of film) has as its task to set out, to recognize. My goal is to demonstrate that Cavell's criticism of literature or film reveals, or demonstrates, that Modernism left all of us wavering between embarrassment and theatricality, and thus with only one honest path: authenticity (candidness). And I will demonstrate, through close reading of Cavell's writing, the centrality of these four early writings by Cavell to literary criticism by showing how Cavell reads works of literature allegorically, as scenes of instruction, and so reveals that works of literature participate monumentally in our understanding of, and inheritance of, skepticism—knowledge of which (of doubt, of disappointment, of limitation of knowledge) cannot be unstuck from our knowledge of ourselves or of the world.