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Shakespeare and Skepticism. Stanley Cavell's Interpretation of Skepticism in *Othello*

Abstract
In the present article I attempt to provide an account of the skeptic-narcissist paradox, which Stanley Cavell finds in Shakespeare's *Othello*. On one hand, Othello is a "perfect soul", on the other, he is condemned to the existence of the Other (Desdemona), in whose gaze the skeptic-narcissist could recognize himself. In this paradoxical sense — from Othello's own perspective — Desdemona threatens his narcissistic integrity, being to him so essential. This is exactly what is involved in the self-contradictory logic of Othello's skeptical attitude, resulting in consequence in the final tragedy.

Shakespeare, literary skepticism, Cavell, philosophy of literature

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1. Introductory remarks

Stanley Cavell is one of the most original and versatile yet also controversial, representatives of contemporary American thought. He is also a highly unusual philosopher. Rooted in the analytic school, under the influence of Austin and Wittgenstein, to whom he devoted his doctoral thesis, Cavell remains immensely critical of the analytic tradition of philosophizing, accusing it of, as he states in one of his texts, forgetting the human voice[1], loss of contact with reality and alienation from life. At the same time, Cavell turns towards the European tradition of philosophy and undertakes the attempt of interconnecting these two distinct intellectual traditions on the basis of his own work.

One of the interesting, although quite controversial, assumptions of the American thinker is his questioning of the philosophy/literature dichotomy. The latter is by no means condemned by Cavell to cognitive subordination, functioning in his thought as a fully-fledged partner and rival of the former (cf. Cavell 1987: 4). I think this assertion situates Cavell — even if he himself may not fully adopt such a view — within the intellectual dispute between philosophy and poetry that has been alive since antiquity.

There is no doubt that for Cavell the great cultural texts are necessarily a kind of conveyer of ideas, a space in which the ideas grow and come in contact with one another, despite the fact that they are not articulated in a discursive way. Cavell emphasizes that literary texts fully deserve philosophical analysis making use of the tools and techniques of philosophy — which he himself does successfully in his writings.

From the very beginning, skepticism plays a crucial role among various subjects analyzed by Cavell in works of literature. Nowhere does Cavell unequivocally define this concept (cf. Cavell 1976: 238–267), the concept of skepticism, exploring its various aspects in works by different authors ranging from Emerson to Beckett. As Cavell himself writes: "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" (Borradori 1994: 133)

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[1] The category of "voice" has a central part in Cavell's philosophy. As Timothy Gould notes, the category of voice plays an important role in the analogy between the doubt of the skeptic who questions the existence of the world and the tragic hero's path to certainty that Cavell analyzes, which will be examined in this text using the example of *Othello* (cf. Gould 1998: 50). See also footnote 6 below. Compare the quote from Cavell: "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«" (Cavell 1994: 58).

2. Skepticism in *Othello*

William Shakespeare is perhaps Cavell's greatest literary fascination. It is the works of the eminent playwright that are the main — that is, the most spectacular in the field of literature — research area for Cavell. In Shakespearean dramas Cavell seeks out clearly sensed, even if not discursively articulated, skeptical intuitions, indicating that even before skepticism settled into the European intellectual scene we come across its clear anticipations in the pages of these plays, especially in *Othello*[2] (cf. Cavell 1976: 3). Cavell dedicated a separate essay to this tragedy, entitled *Othello and The Stake of The Other*, included in the collection *Disowning Knowledge in Six Plays of Shakespeare*[3].

Cavell claims that in the course of reading *Othello*, the attentive reader cannot avoid the question regarding the reasons for which the protagonist of this tragedy does not believe the assurances of Desdemona, while at the same time swearing to himself that he never stopped loving her. Cavell puts it this way: "Why is Othello beyond aid? Why are the ear and the eye in him disjoined?" (Cavell 1987: 128)

One of the answers to this question is provided by Millicent Bell in her book *Shakespeare's Tragic Skepticism*, written later than Cavell's text. Somewhat anticipating our further arguments, consider the findings of the American researcher, which are fully consistent with the theses of Cavell we will discuss later. As Bell writes:

> Faith in Desdemona's innocence, faith which is lost and recovered by Othello only after doubt has done its fatal work, is not the same thing as religious faith. Yet there is a sense in which love for another human and for God may both require the fideist leap. Without it, doubt produces that collapse we witness in Othello. It is precisely because Othello's suspicions cannot either be removed by disproof or justified by proof that his jealousy is a representation of the effects of skepticism. The truth about the virtue of his wife had been as inaccessible to Othello as the truths of religion to the mind infected by contemporary philosophic skepticism. The torment of Othello has been epistemological. (Bell 2002: 116; cf. also Fischer 1989: 85)[4]

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[2] According to Cavell, a similar skeptical intuition, that is questioning the status of the world and the subject immersed within it, can also be traced in other tragedies by Shakespeare, such as *Hamlet*, *The Winter's Tale* or *King Lear*. Cf. also Filipczuk 2016. Due to the fact that my remarks concern the Cavellian interpretation of skepticism contained within a literary text, I am not presenting any typology of skepticism. I think all typologies of that nature would have a secondary meaning as a result of the fact that skepticism discussed in the context of Shakespeare's work is not of a technical nature, and is primarily subjected to the conventions of tragedy as a literary *genre* (cf. Bradshaw 1987: 45–50).

[3] It is worth noting that Shakespeare had a predecessor. It was Montaigne, whose influence on the playwright seems to be undeniable, as Cavell argues (cf. Cavell 1987: 2–3). The writing form practiced by Montaigne, philosophical essay, combines elements of literature and philosophy, and to a certain degree could be treated as a useful vehicle for philosophical ideas that have not yet been precisely formulated and which found their full expression only later, in philosophical texts. One of these concepts was skepticism, which functioned in antiquity as a certain approach to life, but was articulated in a technically satisfying way — as a methodological skepticism — only much later, by Descartes. In Cavell skepticism functions mainly in this sense of an approach to life (though not exclusively); he frequently uses the phrase "living skepticism". Regarding imprecise meanings of the concept of skepticism in Cavell's thought (cognitive, methodological sense versus "existential" skepticism), cf. Bruns 1990; Conant 1991: 616–634. As for the general context of the epoch, cf. Hamlin 2005: 1–6.

[4] According to the standard approaches *Othello* is the model treatment of the problem of jealousy among Shakespearean tragedies. However, in the light of the interpretation I am presenting in this paper, in this Shakespeare's text jealousy is only a secondary phenomenon, constituting merely an epiphenomenon of a much more fundamental condition, which I address later in this paper.

Similarly to the doctrine of the skeptics — we may add — in the text of *Othello* the testimony of the senses, the testimony of sight and hearing, are presented as inconclusive, functioning primarily as a source of deceptive illusions (cf. Bell2002: 84). The motif of sight and hearing appears in the play many times, as if Shakespeare wanted in this way to emphasize the problematic value of the perception of the senses as such.

In act III, scene III Othello says to Iago: "Be sure of it; give me the ocular proof" (361). The "ocular" is an equivalent of the proof. In the text of the play this proof is, however, utilized in a highly ironic way. We repeatedly realize just how deceptive the aforementioned "proof" turns out to be. Completely lost, entangled in the web of Iago's misleading arguments, Othello notes: "Now do I see 'tis true" (Shakespeare 1991: Act III, scene III; 445).

In act III scene III we encounter the following words of Iago: "Men should be what they seem" (127). In the entire play these two spheres, truth and seeming, continuously overlap, and the clear border separating them becomes blurred. Already in Act I scene I, at the stage when the action is developing, Iago begins his self-presentation in such a way: "Others there are / Who, trimm'd in forms *and* visages of duty, / Keep yet their hearts attending on themselves, / And, throwing but shows of service on their lords" (Shakespeare 1991: Act I, scene I; 48–52).

Iago ends his self-portrait as follows: "not I for love and duty, / But seeming so, for my peculiar end (…) / I am not what I am" (Shakespeare 1991: Act I, scene I; 60–65).

Somewhat later in the text, in the form of an ironic self-commentary to his own plotting, Iago notices the following:

> Dangerous conceits are, in their natures, poisons.
> Which at the first are scarce found to distaste,
> But with a little act upon the blood.
> Burn like the mines of Sulphur.
>
> (Shakespeare 1991: Act III, scene III; 327–330)

This poison, once released into the victim's ear, is like "the raven o'er the infected house,/ Boding to all" (Shakespeare 1991: Act IV, scene I; 21–22)[5].

Although Iago's assertions explain a lot about his own actions, they do not shed much light on his underlying motives. Iago mentions revenge on Othello on multiple occasions, yet it is impossible to resist the impression that the motive will remain unexplained even until the end (cf. Bell 2002: 90–94). It is not quite convincing, and it seems that it was in a way appended by Shakespeare in order to rationalize Iago's plotting. When Othello, unable to comprehend Iago's motives, demands the right explanation at the end of the play, the latter replies with the famous words: "Demand me nothing: what you know, you know:/From this time forth I never will speak word" (Shakespeare 1991: Act V, scene II; 303–304).

Therefore, I think we may suggest the thesis that also Iago himself could be interpreted in the spirit of skepticism: although he is the *spiritus movens* of the play, he remains impenetrable and incomprehensible to the very end; in a way hidden in the shadows.

[5] The phrase "infected house" suggests the state of an infected soul, a soul afflicted with the disease of doubt, as if it were a plague.

Let us pause for a moment and ask the most fundamental question in the context of the alleged skepticism in *Othello*: What ultimately connects the protagonists of the play with the skeptic? Both are linked by the postulate of indubitability/certainty of *knowledge*, which would be an equivalent of Platonic Forms, the sphere of knowledge reaching beyond the empiric knowledge, the sense perception. Othello, like a skeptic, also wants to *know*, to know for sure.

When Iago succeeds in planting the seed of suspicion in Othello's mind, Othello bursts out: "I'll have some proof. (…) Would I were satisfied!" (Shakespeare 1991: Act III, scene III; 387, 391). However, none of the ways of knowing available to us meets the rigorous criteria of this certain knowledge, and thus cannot become the source of unconditional *certainty*. That is why the consistent skeptic must inevitably fall into radical doubt, necessarily leading to despair. In act III scene III the Moor says: "To be once in doubt / is once to be resolved" (179–180).

2.1.

For Cavell — especially, but not only in this (strictly Shakespearean) context — skepticism is a form of *narcissism*, which in *Othello* is peculiarly intertwined in the protagonist's view of himself as a romantic hero (Cavell 1987: 143). Othello is not so much in love with Desdemona as he is in love with himself, the idealized image of Othello, reflected — so to speak — in Desdemona's enchanted gaze.

In this spirit, one can interpret Othello's words, when he calls himself a "perfect soul" (Act I, scene II). The word "perfect" here means "without fault", in the sense of "finished, not requiring completion", which is fully in accordance with the Latin root (*perfectus*). Othello is his own exemplification of perfection: he demands a looking glass in which he could enjoy the sight of himself. It is precisely this reflection that he finds in Desdemona's delighted eyes (cf. Cavell 1987: 129–130).

In the play, it is clearly stated that Othello was a frequent guest of Brabantio, Desdemona's father, producing fantastic tales of his travels and adventures. This is how the Moor describes the beginnings of his feelings for the daughter of Brabantio: "She lov'd me for the dangers I had pass'd / And I lov'd her that she did pity them" (Shakespeare 1991: Act I, scene III; 167–168). Note that we are dealing with a curious phenomenon here. For not only is Othello's love not directed at Desdemona, but also the proper object of *her love* is not really Othello himself, but rather an imagined construct woven on the canvas of wonderful tales of extraordinary adventures only incidentally connected to the Moor (cf. Girard 1996: 366). Consider once again the words we encounter in the cited fragment:

> (…) [Desdemona] thank'd me,
> And bade me, if I had a friend that loved her,
> I should but teach him how to tell my story.
> And that would woo her.
>
> (Shakespeare 1991: Act I, scene III; 163–166)

Therefore, we are not only dealing with one mirror here: in fact we confront *two* mirrors, with symmetrical reflections, into which the two lovers are gazing, mistaking appearances — which they can see in the mirror — for reality. This symmetry becomes even more alarming, deepening and multiplying the double mirror effect, when we read another fragment of Othello's monologue, in which he claims that Desdemona: "wish'd/That heaven had made her such a man" (Shakespeare 1991: Act I, scene III; 163). Could it be that Desdemona worshipped the image of Othello, essentially *wishing to become more like him*?

As we have seen, according to Cavell, Othello is a narcissistic type. The romantic auto-creation that takes place in his imagined adventures is the factor determining the character of the feelings growing between him and Desdemona. That we are in fact dealing with his auto-creation is suggested by the biting remark made by Iago, who in his conversation with Roderigo says about Desdemona: "Mark me with what violence she first loved the Moor but for bragging and telling her fantastic lies (…)" (Shakespeare 1991: Act II, scene I; 226–227).

Othello's auto–creation also includes an image of himself as a simple soldier, to whom long speeches, subtle and refined language are foreign:

> Rude am I in my speech,
> And little bless'd with the soft phrase of peace:
> For since these arms of mine had seven years' pith,
> Till now some nine moons wasted, they have used
> Their dearest action in the tented field.
>
> (Shakespeare 1991: Act I, scene III; 81–85)

This image of the Moor as a simpleton stands in clear contradiction to his eloquence, which we often have the opportunity to witness, and harmonizes well with the mystifying strategies of the narcissistic skeptic.

2.2.

In *Disowning Knowledge* Cavell writes:

> The pivot of Othello's interpretation of skepticism is Othello's placing of finite woman in the place of God. [Here I am] recalling a claim of mine to have given a certain derivation for the problem of the Other. I'm also echoing one formulation Descartes gives his motive in wanting to secure God beyond doubt: this motive is to know beyond doubt that he is not alone in the world (the third Meditation). Now I ask, why it is Descartes does not try to defeat this possibility (…) by locating the existence of one other finite being? (Cavell 1987: 126)

According to Cavell, in Shakespeare's drama Desdemona plays a similar role to that of God in Descartes famous skeptical thought experiment. For Descartes, God is a guarantee of the existence of the external world including the body of the thinking subject himself. The subject looks for a reference point in the world but does not find it. Only God can be such a point of reference.

Othello is similarly separated from the source of his own existence. His ideal imagination of himself is founded in something external to himself: in the idealized picture of Othello, whose only source is Desdemona. For Othello, she (or rather her love) is an equivalent of the Cartesian God. If not for God and his real existence, the skeptic would remain trapped in the sphere of his own conceptual constructs, in the sphere of ideas. Even his own body, as an element of the external world, would be inaccessible to him. Therefore, proving the real existence of God is necessary for the skeptic in order to prove his own real existence.

As Cavell suggests, the real existence of Desdemona, the reality of her love, has a similarly fundamental meaning for Othello. Desdemona's alleged betrayal, or perhaps even the possibility of this betrayal, is like the foundation of Othello's being sliding out from beneath his feet. After entering onto the path of doubt (of the faithfulness of his wife), Othello gradually slides into the abyss. This process does not have a logical end, thus the disproportionate character of the despair, the radicalism that is shocking to the audience Othello's despair is driven by the power of its own dynamic, resembling the mechanism of the deepening psychosis. At this stage, the mere facts of the external world have only secondary meaning for the internal decay of the mind, resembling the chain reaction. It can only by stopped by a feeling of certainty. However, since Othello cannot be certain as to the faithfulness of his wife, his uncertainty soon develops into an irrational *conviction of Desdemona's adultery*. Better such a conviction that no conviction at all.

In this context Cavell states that Othello's state of mind is unstable. Having just begun to doubt the faithfulness of his wife, Othello rhetorically asks himself: "Why did I marry?" Othello's mind is constantly oscillating between certainty and doubt. "I think my wife be honest and think she is not; I think that thou art just and think thou art not. / I'll have some proof" (Shakespeare 1991: Act III, scene III; 384–387).

When Othello's belief becomes unshakeable, he suddenly frees himself from his previous doubts. At the end of the drama he speaks to Desdemona:

> Therefore confess thee freely of thy sin;
> For to deny each article with oath
> Cannot remove nor choke the strong conception
> That I do groan withal. Thou art to die.
>
> (Shakespeare 1991: Act V, scene II; 56)

The alleged betrayal of the beautiful Venetian means the ruin of Othello's entire world, the ruin to which he consistently heads from the very beginning. It means the breakdown of his ideal vision of himself and his romanticized world:

> Farewell the tranquil mind; farewell content!
> Farewell the plumed troop and the big wars
> That make ambition virtue!

Farewell the shrill trump
The royal banner and all quality
O farewell!"

(Shakespeare 1991: Act III, scene III; 349–354)

Desdemona is like a stone torn from beneath the pedestal of Othello's own pride and vanity he has built. Standing above his future victim sleeping, Othello utters the famous words in which he compares her to a statue: "I'll not scar that whiter skin of hers than snow, / and smooth as monumental alabaster" (Shakespeare 1991: Act V, scene II; 4). The metaphor of stone returns in the same scene right before the murder of Desdemona, when Othello begins his sacrifice at the altar of ideal love that turned out to be fiction. Thus, in the world of the skeptic, the imagination must ultimately triumph over reality:

O perjur'd woman! Thou dost stone my heart
And mak'st me call what I intend to do
A murder, which I thought a sacrifice

(Shakespeare 1991: 63–65)

According to Cavell, the skeptic, having denied recognition to the other, condemns them to silence, depriving them of their ability to defend themselves — as Othello does, deaf to all of Desdemona's arguments, turning her to stone (cf. Cavell 1987: 137). Denying others, refusing them the right of individuality, signifies the pursuit of dominance and appropriation, limiting them to the boundaries of one's own imagination, which opens up to the unlimited possibilities for manipulation. In the first scene of Act IV Iago utters these significant words to Othello: "Knowing what I am, I know what she shall be", to which the Moor replies: "O thou art wise" (74–75).

On one hand Desdemona is the only external point of reference for Othello's narcissistic auto-creation, a mirror in which the Moor looks at himself. On the other hand, as Cavell writes, "Othello cannot forgive Desdemona for existing, for being separate from him, outside, beyond command" (Cavell 1987: 136)[6]. For Othello, Desdemona is an uncomfortable witness of his human nature/mortality.

3. Overcoming skepticism

From the discussion above I think an answer emerges to the Cavell's question posed in the introduction: why does Othello believe the words of Iago rather than trust the truthfulness of Desdemona? We noted earlier that Othello's certainty regarding Desdemona's unfaithfulness is a result of the logic of the intellectual process itself that the skeptic goes

[6] Cavell's analysis of *Othello* resonates well with remarks of David Hillman, who considers Shakespeare's *King Lear* s in the context of — as he calls it — "somaticity of [its] language" in which "one can discern a carefully wrought design that turns primarily on notions of taking into the body and casting out of it. Bodied forth through this pattern is a profound concern with what inhabits a human frame — with what, or who, is taken in, loved, forgiven or acknowledged, and what or who is refused access to the interior and thereby disavowed or dispossessed (…). One might say that *King Lear* is an extended meditation on the concept of possession, on what it means to own someone or something (to have it, acknowledge it), to be inhabited by the other (to love another, to be unable to resist an other (…)" (Hillman 2007: 120).

through: the dynamic of the sloping plane in which he slides down into chaos[7]. But there seems to be also another circumstance that explains the state of Othello's spirit. Remaining within the realms of skepticism it is never possible to be certain what lies behind the words of the Other, even if we accept, contrary to the metaphor of the stone, that they are not mute and have something to communicate. This radical uncertainty, stemming this time from the ontological abyss separating us from the Other — the diagnosis Cavell provides in his analysis of the (not only Shakespearean) skeptic's alienation from the world — cannot be overcome on a purely theoretical basis[8]. However, Othello was not ready to listen, so he did not believe Desdemona's assurances[9].

The ultimate cause of a certain form of madness of love Shakespeare's work deals with is therefore — as Cavell would have it — another form of madness, a madness of cognitive attitude that manifests itself by, as we have seen, an obsessive search for *evidence* that does not and cannot exist. Nonetheless, Cavell will go even further, saying that Othello had a slight suspicion from the start that Iago's accusations are false, as demonstrated by the ease with which Othello accepts the evidence — when it is already too late — that proves Desdemona's innocence (see Cavell 1975: 267–357). This volatility of Othello's, as well as his neurotic instability that was mentioned earlier, are better explained in the light of the skeptic reading of the play treated as a kind of parable; otherwise the Moor's *naïveté* would certainly seem incomprehensible and puzzling. This incomprehensibility disappears with the assumption of Cavell's premise that Othello's play, in spite of most common interpretations, is not so much a history of morbid jealousy[10], but rather a metaphor for a certain cognitive attitude towards the world, manifested in its denial (see Gould 1998: 99; Rudrum 2013: 54).

In the end, Othello's skepticism is, therefore — according to Cavell — an expression of the refusal to recognize another person; it is an expression of rejection. The alternative choice, as Cavell suggests, would be the acceptance of the Other, which seems to indicate that such a choice, a moral decision, is not completely denied to the tragic hero. In fact, he can choose, and in the end his tragedy comes from pride and ignorance, both cognitive and moral; from a mistake that is of a cognitive and moral nature. In *Othello*, as well as other tragedies, Shakespeare does not deny his tragic heroes moral responsibility for their actions. Tragedy results from a faulty cognitive attitude, from a certain kind of categorical mistake: from seeking knowledge where there is no place for knowledge, or perhaps — as Cavell says — where knowledge itself is not sufficient (see Cavell 1979: 476, 496). This recognition comes to the tragic hero too late, in the form of negative knowledge: Othello

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7 Oddly enough, Iago himself participates in this process. In some of his exchanges with Othello, constructed as if they were an echo, he seems to be the projection of Othello's imagination. For example, this is the case in their conversation about Cassio's relationship with Desdemona (Shakespeare 1991: 563). Cf. Girard 1996: 364.

8 This diagnosis is reflected in almost all of Cavell's texts devoted to this issue. This thesis is most thoroughly argued for by Cavell in the essay *Knowing and Acknowledging* (Cavell 1987).

9 Contrasted, in this context, with knowledge, the concept of acknowledgement plays a key role in particular in the Cavellian interpretation of *King Lear*, and also in his analysis of the attitude of the protagonist of that tragedy — one more Shakespearean skeptic-hero, who waits in vain for an unquestionable, yet unattainable proof of his daughter's love. Cf. Cavell 1975: 267–357.

10 As Millicent Bell and other proponents of traditional interpretation of *Othello* maintain (cf. Bell 2002: 80).

comes to the realization that he misread his fate only when it is no longer possible to change his fate. Therefore, knowledge takes a form of a dark paradox, bringing ruin to those who attain it.

Because, in Cavell's opinion, we cannot know for certain — contrary to what the skeptic demands — that the world really exists, we should conclude from the above that the world should simply be accepted as an inescapable, irreducible fact (Cavell 1987: 95). The American philosopher concludes that because indubitable knowledge is impossible, one should turn to another type of cognition, cognition reaching beyond reason. Here, nearing the end of our discussion, consider the concept of "perpetual faith" that Cavell quotes, this time from Thoreau (cf. Furtak 2007: 542–561), which can be understood as "faith in the senses".

If the conviction that skepticism can be overthrown in a purely discursive way, with the use of arguments, is false — as Cavell seems to suggest in his essay on *Othello* — this necessarily means that we must rely on what our feelings, empathy and reason dictate, as well as the natural disposition of our mind. Since it inclines us towards belief in an external world — which is to some extent caused by our biological constitution — we can therefore say that the duty of justifying one's own doubts about the reality of the world falls to the skeptic: those doubts appear to us as something strikingly unnatural.

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