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Cavell's Shakespeare, or the Insufficiency of Tragedy for Modernity

1.

Stanley Cavell's philosophical interest in Shakespeare is so consistent that Shakespeare appears to have pre-organized the intellectual situation from which Cavell launches the ideation of modernity. That Shakespeare indeed contributes an intellectual situation to Cavell can be evinced from *Disowning Knowledge*, the book where Cavell collected seven essays he had written, over time, on seven different plays by Shakespeare, mostly tragedies, all providing him with the hermeneutic scaffolding of skepticism, which Cavell defines as philosophy's response to modernity. Shakespeare's plays, says Cavell, «interpret and reinterpret the skeptical problematic – the question whether I know with certainty of the existence of the external world and of myself and others in it»[1]. In this fashion, «they test, as well as test themselves by, philosophy».[2]

In an attempt to isolate the defining aspect of skepticism, also the aspect that he finds scandalous, Cavell observes that «what we require in accounting for our sense of relation, or loss of relation, to the other, in place of the best case of knowledge, is the best case of acknowledgement», only to add that «skepticism with respect to the other is not skepticism but is tragedy»[3]. He finds his claim «epitomized in what happens to the other's body, as when Othello's imagination turns Desdemona into alabaster, and when Leontes' faith, or credulousness, turns Hermione [from stone] back into flesh»[4].

What is interesting about this quote is not the fact that Cavell finds his claims epitomized in Shakespeare, but the suggestion that Shakespeare defines tragedy for modernity, so that tragedy in modernity cannot be approached on its own terms, but on the terms relative to Shakespeare. It is in this sense that tragedy in modernity, as Cavell sees it, may actually be its own tragic subject. Furthermore, it follows that tragedy is not synonymous with skepticism, even as it partakes of it, but relates to skepticism similarly to how it relates to Shakespeare: while skepticism addresses «the question whether I know with certainty of the existence of the external world and of myself in it», tragedy appears to be

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[1] Cavell (2003), p. 3.

[2] Ivi, p. 4. Elisabeth Bronfen refers to Shakespeare as Cavell's *Denkraum* (Bronfen, 2009, pp. 163, 165).

[3] Cavell (2005), p. 150.

[4] *Ibidem.*

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assigned the task of importing that relation of exteriority into the self, so that the subjects of tragedy seem to be of interest to skepticism as, also, subjects of psychoanalysis and as political subjects.[5]

2.

Cavell remarks that the Shakespeare book was long in the making and that he had been hesitant about putting it together, because he had felt that Shakespeare, while important to him, demanded the time and the effort he could not spare – almost as if Shakespeare's literature were an injunction similar to the one issued by the ghost in *Hamlet*, whereby philosophy in modernity, like the prince of Denmark or the subject of psychoanalysis, is both invoked *and* frustrated. It therefore comes as no surprise that Cavell's Shakespeare is not exhausted in or by *Disowning Knowledge*, but extends beyond the bounds of Cavell's Shakespeare book. Most notably perhaps, this happens in *Pursuits of Happiness*, Cavell's book on the Hollywood comedy of remarriage, where there is no sustained analysis of Shakespeare's individual plays; yet, Shakespeare remains an interpretive guideline against which to understand the philosophical underpinnings of modernity, as well as modern underpinnings of philosophy.

Also, it is important to note that the Shakespeare of *Pursuits of Happiness* is not the Shakespeare of tragedy – the Shakespeare who defined tragedy for modernity by articulating the rationale of its mutation – but the Shakespeare of romance, the implication being that tragedy fails to delimit the meaning of Shakespeare for philosophy, just as it fails to demarcate modernity. Romance does not supplant tragedy in this semiotic operation. Rather, tragedy and romance combine into an assemblage, where they cohere metonymically; Cavell frequently mobilizes precisely this metonymic relation between them as the groundwork of his philosophical Shakespeare.

Symptomatic in this sense is Cavell's fascination with *The Winter's Tale*, the play Cavell pitches against tragedy in *Disowning Knowledge*, and against romance in *Pursuits of Happiness*, as if to suggest that the most incisive philosophical Shakespeare is the one of *The Winter's Tale*, where the possibility is explored of a relation that is external to both tragedy and romance. As a result,

[5] Gerald L. Bruns remarks that psychoanalysis to Cavell is «a critical language – a language, however, that he turns inside out, as if to place the Shakespearean text in the analyst's chair and ourselves on the couch (Bruns, 1990, p. 623). I argue that Cavell subjects tragedy, not ourselves, to psychoanalysis in this fashion. It is along the same lines that I would reorient Bruns' comparison of Cavell's Shakespeare to Martha Nussbaum's «version of Aristotle's view, that what tragedy cures us of is exactly the sort of desire for self-sufficiency that someone like Socrates tries to arouse in us» (*ibidem*). Interestingly, Nussbaum refers to Cavell's reading of *Othello* when she argues that *Socratic philosophy* may be «our tragedy» (Nussbam, 2001, p. 198). See also ivi, p. 469.

Shakespeare becomes meaningful to Cavell in the position where Cavell imagines Shakespeare's literature to be a relation external to the question of genre, genre being how literature processes the issue of authorization. What Cavell thereby signals, however unwittingly, is that genre aspires to do to literature what the injunction issued by the ghost of the father does to Hamlet, and to the psychoanalytic subject: it aspires to invoke the subject of literature as the subject frustrated to begin with, the subject organized around legal fiction. What Cavell further suggests is that genre has in effect replaced tragedy in modern philosophical discussions of literature, or should replace tragedy in these discussions, because genre (not romance) seems to have taken over the intellectual prerogatives that tragedy had articulated for antiquity – a shift which ultimately testifies to the character of the modern reconstitution(s) of authority and authorization. Tellingly, whenever Cavell invokes the question of genre, in literature and in film, it is to address the contacts of literature and philosophy alongside politics, with the assumption that understanding modernity demands that the question of law and authorization be understood along the lines of literary and cinematic genres. It is in this sense that Cavell's Shakespeare is political just as much it is literary – Cavell's Shakespeare is literary to the extent to which it cannot but be political.[6]

3.

That genus-as-authorization informs Cavell's interest in *The Winter's Tale* can be evinced from his persistent exploration of the theme of paternity in this play. Cavell repeatedly asserts that King Leontes' skepticism about the paternity of his daughter is exemplary of modern skepticism; according to Cavell, Leontes' all-consuming paternal doubt corresponds to the intellectual situation which determines the relation of modern philosophy to the world.[7] That the daughter's name is Perdita almost overdetermines the correspondence, because the relation is the one of perdition and loss both for Shakespeare's king and for the modern philosopher. To this, however, one should add that Leontes' thwarted paternity is reciprocated by the generic ambiguity of the play, with *The Winter's Tale* being variously described as or against comedy, tragedy, romance and problem

[6] Similarly, Jacques Derrida (1980) insists on analyzing genre alongside law, just as he insists on analyzing law alongside genre. Derrida, however, does not imagine literature as a relation external to genre and to law, but as the secret informing their imaginary interiority – a position he most consistently articulates in *The Gift of Death and Literature in Secret*, when he analyzes the foundation of authority in terms of Abrahamic sacrifice, to which literature supplies its core secret/secret core. See Derrida (2008).

[7] See Cavell (1988), pp. 76-101, Id. (1990), pp. 119-120, Id. (2003), pp. 15-16, Id. (2004), pp. 425-426.

play. This means that Leontes, with his thwarted paternity, exemplifies also how genre relates to literature, with Perdita, the contested daughter, exemplifying literature. While this implies that no genre can truly claim *The Winter's Tale*, just as no genre can claim literature, it also suggests that generic logic in literature is inherently flawed and failing, and that a crisis of authorization is constituent to literary genres. Therefore, when Cavell aligns modern philosophy with Leontes, what he promises in fact is that he will miss out on literature in a philosophical pursuit of the generic.[8]

It is in this fashion that Cavell identifies in philosophy an irreducible preoccupation with the generic that blinds philosophy to literature – a blinding which is constituent to philosophy as much as it is constituent to the Oedipus myth. Cavell, unwittingly again, perhaps, discovers that modern philosophy never quite presumes to understand literature, but targets that in literature which coheres around the questions of genus and authorization. Put differently, what fascinates Cavell about literature is a certain Oedipal reductionism of modern philosophy, which is comparable to a certain Oedipal reductionism of psychoanalysis in the wake of Freud's discovery of the death-drive.

4.

Crucial to this position is not merely Cavell's commitment to *The Winter's Tale*. Equally important is the fact that, by thus committing to *The Winter Tale*, Cavell implies a relation to *Hamlet* which cannot be described in terms of approximation, injunction or reduction, even though *Hamlet* has long had the status of an interpretive imperative, specifically in philosophy and critical theory. Carl Schmitt (2006), for instance, insists that *Hamlet* is the specimen story of modernity insofar as it is in *Hamlet* that modernity finds its articulation. The same is true of Walter Benjamin, whose *The Origin of the German Mourning Play* (*Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels*) serves as a point of departure to Schmitt. Benjamin isolates the *Trauerspiel* (the mourning play) of the German literary Baroque as the genre which encapsulates modernity, for philosophy and

[8] Symptomatic in this sense is Cavell's fascination with the woman's voice, in the position where the woman's voice departs from skepticism and, in its line of flight, reveals skepticism to be masculine in character. „A conclusion clearly called for from *The Winter's Tale*," says Cavell, „is that, *so far as* skepticism is representable as the doubt whether your children are yours, skepticism is not a feminine business" (2003: 16). In *A Pitch of Philosophy* he writes about „a woman's knowledgeof a world against which the one she is offered appears second-rate" (1994: 19), and identifies skepticism („that philosophical self-torment") as „one form in which men must and must not hear the woman's voice" (1994: 132). Cavell's attempt to identify skepticism in terms of gender couches in fact the indebtedness of skepticism to the question of genus, so that Cavell's assertions about the masculine character of skepticism entail a grasp of femininity in terms of literature.

for history, and considers *Hamlet* to be a definitive *Trauerspiel*. In the words of Rebecca Comay, *Hamlet* «has a status of an exception» for Benjamin, because «it both exceeds and confirms the basic parameters» of the mourning play[9]. That Cavell is aware of the imperative that *Hamlet* presents to modern philosophy can be evinced from his remark that he is "conscious" of the "brevity" of his piece on *Hamlet* in *Disowning Knowledge*[10], as if being brief on *Hamlet* constituted a transgression and recreated, for philosophy, the narrative circumstances of the play. Furthermore, when Cavell relates modern skepticism, and Shakespeare as exemplary to it, to the proposition that «if assurance in God will be shaken, the ground of the everyday is thereby shaken»[11], he seems to be echoing Benjamin and Schmitt on the birth of the modern world out of the spirit of the Reformation, when the uniform theological platform was compromised and, with it, the legitimizing procedures and the figure of the sovereign.[12]

To be sure, both Benjamin and Schmitt describe *Hamlet* against the mourning play *and* tragedy. While Benjamin argues that the mourning play supersedes tragedy in modernity (with *Hamlet* as the specimen story of this supersession), Schmitt insists that *Hamlet* becomes a tragedy by its raising «a mourning play to tragedy» [13] – the process accomplished by opening the mourning play to the intrusion (*Einbruch*) of historical actuality. It is for this reason, claims Schmitt, that «[t]he tragic ends where play-acting begins, even if the play is meant to make us cry» [14], just as there are «many instances of plays within plays but there is none of a tragedy within the tragedy».[15] In the final analysis, however, both authors privilege the mourning play as a peculiar

[9] Comay (2014), pp. 266-267.

[10] Cavell (2003), p. xi.

[11] Ivi, p. 3.

[12] Cavell relates his interest in «Shakespearean tragedy» to «philosophy's concern, through so much of its modern period, with the crises of knowledge associated with the religious and scientific revolutions of the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, linked with the names of Luther and Galileo and Newton» (Cavell, 2004, p. 424). See Weber (2016) about the reconstitution of the interpretive horizon in the Reformation, with *Hamlet* (between Benjamin and Schmitt) as its specimen story.

[13] Schmitt (2006), p. 38.

[14] Ivi, p. 35.

[15] Ivi, p. 38. According to Miriam Leonard, what Schmitt describes as an intrusion of history and hard historical actuality is comparable to «the Lacanian concept of 'the real'» (Leonard, 2015, p. 2003). Leonard relates this proposition to Schmitt's appreciation of myth in the fifth-century Attic tragedy: for Schmitt, «it is by understanding the true function of myth within Attic tragedy that Shakespeare was able to make *Hamlet* into a real tragedy», because, «[i]n Schmitt's recasting, myth does not stand opposed to history but rather represents a shared knowledge that is comparable to the common experience of historical actuality» (2015, pp. 210, 209).

apparatus with which literature ushers modernity into history by reconfiguring, urgently, the concept itself of a tragic event. The implication is that historicity is reconfigured in the process, tragedy no longer being the exclusive format whereby this reconfiguration can be grasped. While the significance of tragedy is thereby curbed, the significance of genre is not. In fact, genre comes to be identified as the conceptual machine of literature, with genre being the closest literature gets to refining its intelligence into concepts; it is almost as if the tragedy of tragedy in modernity consisted in its being unable to deliver, into modernity, the conceptual apparatus of genre that was gestating in it. (Tragedy in modernity appears to be like Gaia of the Greek myths of origin: forever pregnant with a swarming multitude of godlings/concepts until Zeus, the youngest of them all, is persuaded to castrate the inseminating Uranus from within.)[16]

Mourning in this constellation is not a substitute for the structure of affect that went into the making of a tragic event, in tragedy. Rather, mourning of the mourning play and, by extension, the mourning in *Hamlet* is a response to the loss of the world that was never lost on a tragic event. In other words, what is mourned in the mourning play is the loss of the world that to Greek tragedy was still sufficiently metonymic and paratactic.[17] While mourning becomes functional to modernity as a lynchpin which holds together the loss of these relations and the thought of modernity, loss appears to be how modernity is preordained; there is a preordaining aspect to loss in modernity. A pre-emptive, Abrahamic logic seems to weigh on the loss thus conceived, so that the birth of modernity as explained by Benjamin, even by Schmitt, could be compared to a translation of the world still familiar with tragic events into a world streamlined to fit the rationale of Abrahamic sacrifice. Tellingly, mourning in psychoanalysis performs a similar function. To Freud, mourning seems to be a stepping stone in the intellectual operation whereby a metonymic configuration

[16] Jean-Pierre Vernant argues that tragedy in antiquity launched a far-reaching semiotic mutation whereby a dissonant linguistic horizon was created, which was instrumental to the invention of democracy in ancient Greece. See Vernant, Vidal-Naquet (1990), p. 89. It follows that tragedy was exhausted in mutation and contingency, and could not aspire to the generic logic that was assigned to it by Aristotle, or to a consistent response to myth on which Schmitt relies when he invokes a tragic event in *Hamlet or Hecuba*. It is in this sense that the tragedy that Schmitt has described for political theory (even the tragedy that Aristotle has described for philosophy) aspire actually to the quality of a legal fiction.

[17] It is worth noting that styles of mourning were structural to Greek democracy too, insofar as they pressed on the rationality of polis, and had to be processed from within. Bonnie Honig notes that Sophocles' *Antigone*, a play about styles of mourning, is critical in this sense, because it «repeatedly explores the question of how permissibly to grieve not just ungrieveable life but grievable life as well» (Honig, 2013, p. 96). See also Jukić (2017).

of melancholia is processed into loss and ultimately into the death drive (*Todestrieb*), the death drive designating an Abrahamic relation to death, stripped equally of the world and of melancholia, and understood in terms of castration, concept and law.[18]

5.

All these different trajectories intersect in *Hamlet*. In *Hamlet*, the story is decided by Hamlet's father, the dead king, the spectral figure of supreme authority, who issues an injunction to be released from the order of ghosts (the order of mourning), into the order where death is equal to concept. While the peculiar situation of the father's ghost in *Hamlet* reciprocates in effect the process whereby political modernity is launched, it reciprocates also the intellectual operation whereby Freud has processed the metonymic configuration of melancholia into the concept-machine of the death drive. It is important in this context that the Freudian death drive assumes for itself law in the state of an impossible purity, law in an untenable isolation from the demands of subjectivity – which in turn is an accurate approximation of how literary theory conceives of genre.

The Winter's Tale, the play important to Cavell similarly to how *Hamlet* was important to Benjamin and Schmitt, shares its narrative and epistemic stakes with *Hamlet*. The one who decides the course of action is again the royal father, the figure of supreme political authority, as he endeavors to shed the doubts which yoke him to the order of the image and the imaginary. Indeed, Hermione and Perdita plague King Leontes chiefly from the order of the visual, as the unwanted, uncanny sights that keep feeding his outrage which, like madness in *Hamlet*, is associated with mourning. That mourning is the regime from which *The Winter's Tale* derives both its madness and its peculiar reason is reinforced by the play's ending: Hermione and Perdita reemerge at the end, in their different ways, as if resurrected from the dead, so that their spectral pressure on Leontes is never effectively discontinued, just as the spectral pressure on Hamlet, by his father's ghost, can be effectively dispelled only in the event of the prince's death. Once again, mourning is associated with the figures of authority,

[18] I am alluding to Freud's work in the mid- and late 1910s, whose cornerstones are discernible in «Mourning and Melancholia» («*Trauer und Melancholie*», 1917) and *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (*Jenseits des Lustprinzips*, 1920). When Leonard compares Schmitt's «hard historical actuality» to the Lacanian concept of the Real, she notes that, «[d]espite explicitly rejecting 'psychologizing' readings of tragedy associated with Freud, from the reference to the taboo to his interest in melancholy to his representation of history as a repressed trauma, Schmitt's text is replete with Freudian vocabulary and thematization» (Leonard, 2015, p. 202).

as the pathology consistent with normativity and the acts of foundation. This in turn is consistent with Freud's description of mourning as normal or normalizing, in contrast to melancholia, whose pathology cannot be processed into normativity.[19] After all, Cavell himself aligns *The Winter's Tale* with *Hamlet* and *King Lear*, the plays about mad kings and princes, as the plays which contribute precisely this critical situation to modern philosophy.[20]

6.

Yet, Cavell extricates his forays into *The Winter's Tale* equally from mourning and from the mourning play. *The Winter's Tale* is functional to him as a romance, in the position where romance, especially Shakespearean romance, «centrally in *The Winter's Tale*», constitutes «a precedent» to the conceptual apparatus of his philosophical engagement with film and America[21]. Romances seem to pick up on the crisis of norm and authorization, which are implicit equally to the mourning play and to Freudian mourning, but claim that crisis for a sustained Utopian fantasy of democratic commitment and political promise. In Cavell's words, romances, in film and literature alike, «harbor a vision which they know cannot be fully domesticated, inhabited, in the world we know»[22]; in classical Hollywood, which to Cavell is the hotbed of the American imaginary, romances show «us our fantasies, they express the inner agenda of a nation that conceives Utopian longings and commitments for itself»[23]. Put otherwise, romances signal that the political promise of modernity does not fully overlap with the structure of mourning, even as both continue to feed on the spectral; they signal that the spectral is not exhausted in or by mourning, but keeps undercutting the mourning's potential for homogenization.

This is also how to understand the fact that Cavell's perspective on romance, while not to be confused with Benjamin's reading of the mourning play, still betrays an affinity with Benjamin's arguments: both authors rely on the visual properties of romance and the mourning play, respectively. Cavell praises romance as a structure of sustained fantasy which harbors visions that cannot be fully domesticated and inhabited; to Benjamin, the mourning play evidences the world withdrawn into the act of visual contemplation, to the point of

[19] See Freud (1992), p. 173.

[20] In his discussion of *The Winter's Tale*, Cavell remarks: «Always seen as a matter essential to the flourishing state, recognizing (legitimizing) one's child now appears as a matter essential to individual sanity, a discovery began perhaps in Hamlet, and developed in Lear» (Cavell, 2003, p. 204).

[21] Cavell (1981b), p. 19.

[22] Ivi, p. 18.

[23] *Ibidem*.

prepossession. Yet, Cavell depends on emancipating the visual regime of romance away from mourning and into the uncanny, which, in psychoanalytic terms, is how skepticism is saved from its being processed into the death drive. Indeed, Cavell himself refers to the Freudian uncanny when he wants to explain the structure of skepticism, the uncanny designating a remarkable sustenance of fantasmatic visuality in the positions where mourning, as well as the death drive, would depend on its interruption.[24]

7.

Film and America are essential here, and Cavell assigns them the place that Benjamin and Schmitt assign to literature and to political modernity.

Film seems to have done to philosophy that which literature had done to philosophy before the invention of film; it is in this sense that film in Cavell's writings is tantamount to what tragedy in ancient antiquity had done to philosophy forming in its wake. According to Cavell, the creation of film «was as if meant for philosophy – meant to reorient everything philosophy has said about reality and its representation, about art and imitation, about greatness and conventionality, about judgment and pleasure, about skepticism and transcendence, about language and expression»[25]. America is bound with film similarly to how the invention of democracy in ancient Greece was bound with the birth of tragedy. It is almost as if America could not have known itself before the invention of film, just as the democratic Athens could not have invented itself before the invention of tragedy, a condition crucial to political modernity insofar as America, to this day, remains the laboratory of political modernity.[26]

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[24] See Cavell (1988) for a discussion of skepticism along the lines of the Freudian uncanny. That Cavell depends on divorcing the uncanny from the death drive, and from interruption, in order to save it for skepticism, can be inferred from his explicit rejection of Freud's identification of the uncanny with the threat of castration. Cavell attempts to perform a similar operation on mourning (and thus rescue it for skepticism), when he remarks that «Freud too thinks of mourning as an essentially repetitive exercise», so that «[l]earning mourning may be the achievement of a lifetime» insofar as «the world must be regained every day, in repetition, regained as gone» (ivi, p. 172). However, by focusing on repetition, Cavell identifies in mourning precisely the interruption that would prove fatal to skepticism. That Cavell may have developed a take on mourning which is more consistent with the death drive can be evinced from his 1999 essay on Benjamin, where he associates skepticism with melancholia and mourning with a letting go of the world (Cavell, 1999, p. 238). Cavell reaffirms this position in 2005, when he identifies skepticism «as caused by, and causing, a form of melancholy» (Cavell, 2005, p. 40).

[25] Cavell (1996), pp. vii, xii.

[26] Cavell's appropriation of *Shakespeare* for the philosophical and the political project of *America* suggests that an intellectual affinity persists between the English and the American

Moreover, film is how the uncanniness and the spectrality are *exacted*. Again, it is a distinction which finds its footing in the narrative conditions of *The Winter's Tale* and *Hamlet*. What distinguishes *The Winter's Tale* from *Hamlet* appears to be the narrative fact that the spectral grip on Leontes is not discontinued at the end, whereas the spectral grip on Hamlet is killed off, with the death of Hamlet. *The Winter's Tale* ends when King Leontes has been successfully claimed for the uncanny; *Hamlet* ends when Prince Hamlet has failed to be successfully claimed for the uncanny. In Cavell's words, «even after believing the truth proclaimed by an oracle Leontes is not brought back to the world (supposing he ever is) except by the drama of revelation and resurrection at the end of this work for theater; by seeing something, beyond being told something»[27].

Resurrection here is a mark of romance: not because Hermione's life has been remobilized out of death, in a moving spectacle, but because the uncanny is thereby sustained as or into a Utopian fantasy. Tellingly, the tragedy of *Hamlet* seems to consist in its cultivating a remove from the uncanny. The remove results not merely in an ultimate break with the uncanny and the killing off of its mad prince, but also in the snatching away of Hamlet's death into an authority unconcerned with specters, which is nearly equal to snatching his death away from an event and into a concept.

8.

Cavell's reading of *Hamlet* in *Disowning Knowledge* is symptomatic of this cultivation of the uncanny for philosophy. Instead of tailoring Shakespeare to *Hamlet*, as if *Hamlet* were a kind of synecdoche that encapsulates, or at least overshadows, the rationale of Shakespeare's other plays, Cavell – it turns out –

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revolutions. After all, Schmitt insists that *Hamlet* «coincides with the first stage of the English revolution», which «lasted a hundred years, from 1588 to 1688» (Schmitt, 2006, pp. 54, 56), while Hannah Arendt remarks that the signers of the Declaration of Independence mobilized «the horizontal version of the social contract», articulated by Locke (Arendt, 1972, pp. 86; see also Jukić, 2016, pp. 87, 91). Cavell in his turn, in *Cities of Words*, identifies Milton and Locke as «revolutionary writers: Milton the theorist of the Puritan Revolution that first overthrew the Stuarts and killed a king (Charles I) in 1649; Locke the theorist who found the way to the bloodless or 'glorious' revolution that, after the restoration of the Stuarts, deposed James II in 1688 in favor of William and Mary» (Cavell, 2004, p. 51). Cavell proceeds to align Locke with the same configuration of thought with which he has aligned Shakespeare's romances in *Pursuits of Happiness* (Cavell, 1981b, p. 18, Id., 2004, p. 52), the implication being that Shakespeare's romances and Locke's political theory are assembled around the same critical task.

[27] Cavell (2003), p. 204.

tailors his reading of *Hamlet* to the rationale of *The Winter's Tale*, so that his *Hamlet* resonates with the rationale of romance.

As noted, Cavell hints at the fact that his essay on *Hamlet* is uncommonly brief; he also warns that it took contriving to make his Shakespeare book end on a thought of Hamlet's [28]. Even more significant is the circumstance that, in his reading of the play, Cavell does not focus on the father's ghost, even though the father's ghost is where the uncanny originates in *Hamlet*. Instead, Cavell focuses on Hamlet's theatrical production of *The Mousetrap*, because the burden to prove «the Ghost's honesty» and test «Claudius's conscience» [29], to which Hamlet testifies when he decides to stage the play (within the play), is that instance which most consistently recreates the conditions of skepticism.[30]

Cavell explores this premise, again, by recourse to psychoanalysis; he argues that Hamlet rehearses the primal scene by staging *The Mousetrap*[31]. While the primal scene is thereby promoted into a scene of skepticism, what Cavell occludes in his analysis is the narrative fact that, by staging *The Mousetrap*, Hamlet attempts to recreate, for everybody in the play, the stakes of the uncanny. In other words, by staging *The Mousetrap*, Hamlet attempts to divorce the uncanny from his father's ghost and from the domain of injunction, and horizontalize it as it were, until it has produced a veritable political collective. This is how Hamlet stages in effect a spectacle similar to the one at the end of *The Winter's Tale*, with *The Mousetrap* as a promise of romance. It is important to note that *The Mousetrap* is structured around a dumb show: as a dumb show, it follows to the letter the requirement that Cavell finds imperative to *The Winter's Tale* – to see something, beyond being told something. Voice in turn is revealed to cater to the order of the paternal and to authority on its way to the death drive. Incidentally, Cavell analyzes this proposition at some length in his piece on *The Winter's Tale*, when he draws attention to the fact that Leontes' madness is provoked by his desire to hear (that which is meant to reach the ear of the other).[32] It is as if *The Winter's Tale* served to split the father's ghost of *Hamlet* into the spectral regime (the regime of romantic resurrection) and the

[28] Ivi, p. xi.

[29] Ivi, p. 179.

[30] When Cavell refers to proof as Hamlet's burden, also to knowledge as burden (2003: 179), this corresponds to Cavell's description of skepticism as philosophical self-torment (1994: 132).

[31] Cavell (2003), p. 187.

[32] Cavell refers, with some insistence, to the episode when Leontes' madness is decided by his desire to know with certainty what his son Mamillius, Perdita's brother, was whispering in the ear of Hermione, Leontes' Queen and the boy's mother (ivi, pp. 194-198). In yet another turn, this very structure of hearing is reciprocated by the narrative stakes of *The Mousetrap*, in *Hamlet*, in which the king is murdered by the poison administered to him through the ear.

voice, so that the tragic aspect of *Hamlet* is revealed to reside in Hamlet's fatal confusion of the two. Or, more to the point perhaps, it is as if *Hamlet* served to show how fusing, or confusing, the spectral and the voice is a formula whereby romance is translated into tragedy.

9.

Cavell certainly intuits this formula (hence his focus on the primal scene), but fails to process it beyond a blind spot. Similarly, he intuits an Oedipal inflection to *The Winter's Tale* by which this translation is carried out:

> While evidently I expect considerable agreement that in Leontes' intrusion we have an Oedipal conflict put before us, I am not assuming that we thereupon know how to work our way through the conflict. Freud, I guess like Sophocles, seems to look at the conflict as initiated by the son's wish to remove or replace the father, whereas in *The Winter's Tale* the conflict, on the contrary, seems primarily generated by the father's wish to replace or remove the son. Perhaps this speaks of a distance between tragedy and romance – hence of their inner union – but [...] I do not wish to prejudge such a matter .[33]

Rather than drawing attention to the generational reversal, I would like to point to the narrative fact that Oedipal details are scattered throughout the narrative of *The Winter's Tale*. Like Oedipus, Leontes seeks a word from the oracle at Delphi; like Oedipus, the infant Perdita is left out in the open to die, but is saved by a shepherd; like Oedipus, Perdita, presumed dead, returns to overturn the structure of her parental home; Antigonus is thrown in as the one who saves the infant Perdita from death, thus reciprocating Antigone in her double role as Oedipus' daughter and guardian... In this fashion, the Oedipal is emancipated from the grasp of Leontes and into a narrative collective, a procedure similar to Hamlet's attempt to emancipate the uncanny from the grip of his father's ghost and into a collective. The authority accumulated in the Oedipal is thereby redistributed across the narrative, resulting in a narrative order whose Oedipal stakes are metonymic and paratactic. It is almost as if Shakespeare of *The Winter's Tale* dismantled Oedipus as tragedy into its narrative building blocks, thus recreating for the story of Oedipus its mythical properties.

[33] Ivi, p. 199.

That is not to say that Shakespeare recreated the conditions of antiquity. It does, however, bring to mind Schmitt's remark that modern tragedy depends on an intrusion of hard historical actuality, which Schmitt relates to a similar actuality of myth in ancient Greece. What Schmitt implies, and Shakespeare foregrounds in *The Winter's Tale*, is the hard actuality of the *narrative* which informs both modern history and ancient mythos, but is admitted to genre as an intrusion, a Schmittian *Einbruch*, introducing into genre the relations of metonymy and of parataxis in the positions where genre depends on cultivating the logic of metaphor and of hypotaxis.[34]

It therefore comes as no surprise that *The Winter's Tale*, with its paratactic Oedipus, resonates with Claude Lévi-Strauss' classic reading of the Oedipus myth. Unlike Freud, who privileges the sexual and the paternal aspect of the story of Oedipus, Lévi-Strauss argues that the myth of Oedipus is decided by a more elaborate narrative assemblage. According to Lévi-Strauss, the overvaluation and the undervaluation of kinship and sexuality in the Oedipus myth are constantly counteracted by the myth's investment in the chthonic relations.[35] It is certainly telling that Cavell elsewhere aligns his philosophical position on humanity with Lévi-Strauss' appreciation of the chthonic, and allows that Lévi-Strauss may be «right to relate a mythic question about walking to the fact of being human, a reminder that we are earthlings»[36]. The same applies to *The Winter's Tale*: it culminates with Hermione restored to life from a stone statue. The stone statue confirms the chthonic principle, but also coincides with the supremacy of the uncanny in the final spectacle, as if to suggest that the chthonic aspect is how the Oedipal is enacted in the uncanny, and in romance. This is how *The Winter's Tale* may have revised the Oedipal stakes of *Hamlet*: by privileging the chthonic, the metonymic and the paratactic in the positions where *Hamlet* privileges the sexual and the paternal.[37]

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[34] There is a logic to this emancipation of the narrative that seems to inform the project of modernity, as if the narrative unfettered by the supremacy of genre were how to explain modernity. Samuel Weber alludes to this when he compares Aristotle's requirement for a synoptic management of story in tragedy to Benjamin's appreciation of «'epic extension' (*epische Streckung*: literally 'stretching') as a distinguishing characteristic of Brecht's theater» (Weber, 2008, p. 102).

[35] Lévi-Strauss notes that the Freudian perspective on the Oedipus myth «has ceased to be that of autochtony *versus* bisexual reproduction," but that this relation has been retained, for psychoanalysis, in "the problem of understanding how *one* can be born from *two*» (Lévi-Strauss, 1963, p. 217).

[36] Cavell (1979), p. 80.

[37] Vernant points out that Lévi-Strauss' reading of the Oedipus myth was substantially influenced by Lévi-Strauss' earlier studies of «Amerindian myths». According to Vernant, this American inflection shows most consistently in Lévi-Strauss' focus on the chthonic

10.

It is within this shift that tragedy remains functional to Cavell. While Benjamin, and Schmitt in Benjamin's wake, depend on discontinuing tragedy in order to process it alongside the mourning play, this being how modernity finds its articulation, Cavell takes Shakespeare to be the author of tragedies, in modernity and for it, because his tragedies invoke the insufficiency of tragedy to know and speak the modern world without recourse to romance. That is not to say that romance is therefore sufficient to the modern world to the point of self-sufficiency (a position cultivated by Benjamin for the mourning play). Rather, romances are functional to modernity – because they sustain the precarious fantasies of longing and commitment «which they know cannot be fully domesticated, inhabited, in the world we know» – but it takes tragedy to expose the status of romance as precarious, just as tragedy is thereby exposed as insufficient.

A relation of exteriority is introduced in this fashion, which binds romance and tragedy into an assemblage. Assembled like this, romance and tragedy keep feeding not off each other but on the relations they trace but cannot delimit. It is in this sense that Cavell's Shakespeare is consummately the Shakespeare of metonymy, and of parataxis. In the words of Erich Auerbach, parataxis is how philology describes phenomena that are «externalized» and «connected together without lacunae in a perpetual foreground»; parataxis is defined by its mobilization of «and»[38]. Furthermore, it is along these lines that Cavell may be said to have translated tragedy, and romance, into empiricism, with Shakespeare as its exemplary dramatist. Indeed, Cavell's Shakespeare is evocative of Gilles Deleuze's portrayal of Hume. With Hume, says Deleuze, «the empiricist world can for the first time truly unfold in all its extension: a world of exteriority, a world where thought itself is in a fundamental relation to the Outside, a world where terms exist like veritable atoms, and relations like veritable external bridges – a world where the conjunction 'and' dethrones the interiority of the verb 'is'.[39]

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aspect of the Oedipus myth, that until then went unnoticed (Vernant, Vidal-Naquet, 1990, p. 207). This suggests that the Oedipus which best captures the narrative relations of *The Winter's Tale* is in effect an American Oedipus – a suggestion that may explain, to an extent, the appeal of *The Winter's Tale* to Cavell as a philosopher of America. As it happens, Cavell frequently resorted to Lévi-Strauss' studies of myth when he analyzed the narrative material of the Hollywood remarriage comedy in relation to the political and the philosophical project of America (Cavell, 1981b, pp. 76, 94, 103, 105, 152).

[38] Auerbach (2003), pp. 11, 70-71.

[39] Deleuze (2004), p. 163. Indeed, Cavell's Shakespeare may be how Cavell has unwittingly preempted his own criticism of Hume. In his Shakespeare book Cavell says that,

For this reason, tragedy for Cavell is never a tragedy or the tragedy, but assumes a plurality that is not one of genre but one of a collective. For the same reason, *Hamlet* retains its significance no longer as a synecdoche of Shakespeare; its significance to Cavell is of the order of parataxis. As a result, Cavell's *Hamlet* is never contained in itself. The same is true of Cavell's approach to classical Hollywood. Although Cavell routinely charts his exploration of film, especially of classical Hollywood, by invoking its genres – especially the so called remarriage comedy, in *Pursuits of Happiness*, and the melodrama of the unknown woman, in *Contesting Tears* – he keeps deconstructing them into collectives, just as he keeps suggesting that deconstructing genre in this fashion may be the only proper way of understanding genre, in literature and in film. His seven plays of Shakespeare are comparable to his seven remarriage comedies, by different authors, and to his four melodramas of the unknown woman. This indicates that Shakespeare is not an author to Cavell, not even the author, so much as a mobilizing literary circumstance.[40]

Further relations are thereby invoked that, in political theory, correspond to the horizontal social contract advertised by Locke. In the words of Hannah Arendt, the Lockean social contract relates to «the only form of government in which people are bound together not through historical memories or ethnic homogeneity, as in the nation state, and not through Hobbes's Leviathan, which 'overawes them all' and thus unites them, but through the strength of mutual promises»[41]. This, says Arendt, is «an 'alliance' between all individual members, who contract their government after they have mutually bound themselves», which is how society «remains intact even if 'the government is dissolved' or breaks its agreement with society, developing into a tyranny»[42]. Interestingly, Arendt remarks that «the American prerevolutionary experience, with its numerous covenants and agreements» was the model that Locke «actually had in mind» when he said that «[i]n the beginning, all the world was America».[43] In

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«[c]ompared 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» (Cavell, 2003, p. 2).

[40] See Cavell (2005), pp. 34-36 on Shakespeare as author.

[41] Arendt (1972), pp. 86-87.

[42] *Ibidem.*

[43] Ivi, p. 85. Arendt argues that this early American political experience informs «[t]he greatest revolutionary innovation, Madison's discovery of the federal principle for the foundation of large republics», based upon «a constant enlargement whose principle was neither expansion nor conquest but the further combination of powers» (Arendt, 1963, p. 168). It is symptomatic that Arendt describes the greatest American revolutionary invention in the terms which correspond closely to Deleuze's description of Hume's empiricism, just as

other words, there is a sense that the Lockean horizontal social contract is American to begin with, and that America designates the birth, or rather the invention, of modernity.

11.

This is consistent with Cavell's perspective on America. To Cavell, America is a project which is definitive to philosophical and political modernity; it is in America, or as America, that *raison* and rationale of modernity stand to be decided. This also explains the high stakes of Cavell's investment in psychoanalysis, psychoanalysis being to Cavell the intellectual regime which captures the structures of madness that are implicit to the *raison* of modernity. Indeed, Cavell's interest in psychoanalysis is as pervasive and comprehensive as his interest in Shakespeare.

That Cavell's Freud is a match for a Lockean America can be inferred from the fact that Cavell favors hysteria as that pathology which best explains the failure of the American project. In *Contesting Tears* Cavell associates the unhappy woman of the Hollywood melodrama with the failure of the American political and philosophical project, to then relate the structure of her unhappiness to the hysterical woman of Freud's and Breuer's early studies[44]. Interestingly, Cavell is fascinated with hysteria because the hysterical symptoms mobilize to the fullest the surfaces of this woman, so that even in her unknownness and separateness she is brought to relate, critically, to the outside. In other words, what matters to Cavell about Freud's and Breuer's explanation of hysteria is an appreciation of exteriority, where thought itself, along with the unconscious, is in a fundamental relation to the outside.

Cavell articulates this position most cogently in his 1996 book on Hollywood melodrama, which is also a companion piece to *Pursuits of Happiness*. He thereby outlines a position where Freudian psychoanalysis is brought into line with Shakespearean romance, just as melodrama of the unknown woman is brought into line with remarriage comedy. Although Cavell prefers to identify this relation as the one of negation, what ensues is an assemblage where negation and genre are deconstructed away into modern contractuality, just as psychoanalysis is brought to reconsider its early investment in hysteria as another one which resists an unproblematic sublation by or into the death drive.

Deleuze's description of Hume's empiricism corresponds to Deleuze's definition of assemblage (*agencement)*, for instance in Deleuze and Parnet (1987), pp. 52, 69. It is equally symptomatic that Deleuze understands Anglo-American literature in terms of assemblage. See also Jukić (2016), p. 95.

[44] Cavell (1996), pp. 105-106.

Of course, this suggests that Cavell's critical task cannot be divorced from psychoanalysis, and that Freud is integral to the crisis and the critique that Shakespeare presents to Cavell's philosophical situation. In fact, Cavell responds to psychoanalysis similarly to how he responds to Shakespeare: just as his Shakespeare is ultimately a collective, whose deconstruction of genre provides Cavell with a *Denkraum* from which to launch an investigation of modern rationality, Cavell's psychoanalysis emerges as an assemblage of conditions (the uncanny, mourning, melancholia, hysteria, the primal scene…) that are emancipated from the structural imperative of the death drive. It is in this sense that Cavell's Oedipus is an American Oedipus, and his Freud an American Freud: the Oedipal agenda of psychoanalysis is functional to Cavell insofar as it is brought to relate to the narrative and the intellectual packages of Lévi-Strauss' Oedipus, with its significant American inflection. Put differently, psychoanalysis is functional to Cavell as a paratactic collective of conditions, a contractual configuration in the position where the death drive would designate the law.

12.

This is why Cavell's most revealing essay on Shakespeare (also his most American essay on Shakespeare) may be his study of Alfred Hitchcock's *North by Northwest* (1959), the film in which, as Cavell rightly points out, Hitchcock has mobilized *Hamlet* in and for America, also the film which «plays a special role in Hitchcock's oeuvre, a summary role»[45].

Cavell catalogues an impressive number of details that testify to *North by Northwest* being Hitchcock's *Hamlet*. After all, the name of the film is a quote from *Hamlet* (Act 2, Scene 2), when Hamlet stages *The Mousetrap* and explains to Guildenstern the structure of his madness, saying that he is «but mad north-north-west». What Hamlet means by this is that he is feigning his madness in part, that his madness is both feigned and not quite feigned, which is to say that this madness is constituent of his rationality, perhaps of rationality as such, just as it is constituent of the theatrical illusion. The same is true of Hitchcock's *North by Northwest*: Cary Grant, like Hamlet, depends on putting on a show of madness in order to mobilize investigation and solve the riddle, which is how a certain irreducible irrationality of his position comes to the fore, constituent also of cinematic reality.

Moreover, Hitchcock takes "north-north-west" to be a metonymy of America, with America as the north-by-northwest of his narrative. He mobilizes the story around the advertising world of New York City, to then move it north by

[45] Cavell (1981a), p. 766.

northwest across the United States until the story's rationale has been fully revealed and enacted on the Mount Rushmore monument in South Dakota. Indeed, the resolution of the film is staged around the shot of Cary Grant and Eva Marie Saint as minuscule figures atop the gigantic stone head of Thomas Jefferson; their subsequent spectacular fear of falling, reminiscent of similar falls in *Vertigo* and *Rear Window*, implies the mortal danger of losing a grip on (Jeffersonian) America.

It follows that *North by Northwest* entails the rationale of America, also that America should be grasped as a peculiar rationality, a truth on its own terms; equally, this implies that the American truth is not of the order of metaphor. Instead, Hitchcock shifts the stakes against which this truth is understood into a metonymic regime. Another implication is as interesting: this American rationale coincides with the *narrative* logic of Hitchcock's film, because the narrative is organized around a series of paratactic places against which Cary Grant is tested.

Curiously, if Cary Grant is Hitchcock's Hamlet, the massive stone head of Thomas Jefferson, the American founding father, assumes the function of the father's ghost, but now on markedly chthonic terms. It is equally symptomatic that a chthonic encounter with a founding father is how the film *ends*, so that Jefferson assumes the function of the narrative and the intellectual scaffolding (always a relation of exteriority), but not the function of a foundational injunction. This in turn is consistent with the resolution of *The Winter's Tale*, when a closing encounter with Hermione's life-like stone statue metonymizes the terms of rationality for King Leontes. In fact, *North by Northwest* could be described as *Hamlet* reconstituted into *The Winter's Tale* – which may explain the appeal of this particular Hitchcock to Cavell.

It therefore comes as no surprise that Cavell should argue that, Hamletism notwithstanding, «*North by Northwest* is a romance»[46]. Consistent with this is another observation, that *North by Northwest* articulates what Cavell calls «a state secret»[47], the implication being that Hitchcock's romantic American *Hamlet* is how the secret of modern statehood is encoded, with America as its laboratory. It is equally significant that Cavell should identify *North by Northwest* as «a warning to Freudians, even a dare»[48], especially to Ernest Jones' *Hamlet and Oedipus*. In other words, Cavell assumes for Hitchcock's *Hamlet* an inflection along the lines of the story of Oedipus, but not along the lines that psychoanalysis has decided for this relation. Finally, Cavell assumes for this *Hamlet* the intrusion of the historical narratives that Schmitt identifies as

[46] Ivi, p. 763.
[47] Ivi, p. 776.
[48] Ivi, p. 767.

definitive to tragedy in modernity: in his analysis of *North by Northwest* Cavell mobilizes Saxo Grammaticus' *Danish History* as insistently as he mobilizes Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, so that Cavell's American *Hamlet* emerges eventually as a narrative assemblage reminiscent of Lévi-Strauss' Oedipus. My reference to Lévi-Strauss here is motivated by yet another reason: whenever Cavell invokes Saxo Grammaticus' narrative, it is chiefly because Saxo Grammaticus supplies him with the chthonic relations that Cavell finds crucial to *North by Northwest*, but cannot find in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*.[49]

It is almost as if Cavell, with his translation of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* back to the terms of Oedipus, suggested that the truth of America depended on America being to modernity what fifth-century Athens had been to classical antiquity. This being, in equal parts, America's romance and America's tragedy.

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[49] To be sure, Cavell does not identify these relations as chthonic, but they do entail a chthonic inflection. For example, Cavell claims «Hamlet's prototype in Saxo Grammaticus» for Hitchcock's Cary Grant, because he, like Cary Grant, is «pictured as covering himself with dirt» (Cavell, 1981a, p. 765).The chthonic details abound: Cavell feels compelled to compare the Mount Rushmore heads to the Sphinx (ivi, p. 773), again echoing Lévi-Strauss, to whom the Sphinx serves to articulate the chthonic aspect of the Oedipus myth.

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Abstract
Stanley Cavell's philosophical interest in Shakespeare is so consistent that Shakespeare appears to have pre-organized, for Cavell, the intellectual situation from which to launch the ideation of modernity. I propose to discuss Cavell with a view to similar constellations in Walter Benjamin and Carl Schmitt, but careful of the fact that, unlike Schmitt or Benjamin, Cavell does not privilege *Hamlet* as a text to which Shakespeare appears reducible. Instead, Cavell's Shakespeare is collective and paratactic, with the implication that tragedy, taken in isolation (even as it morphs into mourning play), fails to capture the truth of modernity. What emerges in Cavell is a Shakespeare whose tragedy works from within a Lockean social contract with other genres – a condition crucial to Cavell's philosophical concerns.

Keywords: Cavell, Shakespeare, Modernity, Tragedy, Film, Psychoanalysis.