

Philosophy and Mercy: Remarks on Cavell and Auden

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Philosophical discussions about philosophical style are rare. Reluctance to engage with the topic suggests uncertainty about its philosophical substance. The position, articulated in characteristically trenchant manner by Bertrand Russell, that 'every philosophical problem, when it is subjected to the necessary analysis and purification, is found either to be not really philosophical at all, or else ... logical'¹ bars the exploration of style from the range of philosophically useful or appropriate pursuits. Style is what is scrubbed off once the work of analysis is done. This conception of style as extraneous matter and, as such, fundamentally dispensable comes to grief when one encounters a work which resists 'purification', a work in which the argument can be reached only by attending to its manner of presentation. In this essay, I want to discuss such a work, Stanley Cavell's *The Claim of Reason: Wittgenstein, Skepticism, Morality, and Tragedy*. I will conduct part of the discussion indirectly by turning to a poetic work, W. H. Auden's 'The Sea and the Mirror: A Commentary on Shakespeare's *The Tempest*'.

One of the striking features of Cavell's prose is its performatory character. The writing carries the weight of the philosophical tasks of the book and so it is integral to its philosophical substance. This has led early readers to conclude that the work eludes paraphrase, and that it is best seen as situated halfway between poetry and philosophy.² How can we then approach such a book? We can begin by seeking to discover the philosophical concerns that guide Cavell's stylistic choices. Style contains

¹ B.A. W. Russell, *Our Knowledge of the External World* (London: Routledge, 1914), p.42.

² John Hollander, 'Stanley Cavell and *The Claim of Reason*', *Critical Inquiry* 6:4 (1980), 575-588.

Hollander writes: 'Cavell constantly implies that there are parables to be drawn about the way we treat the objects of our consciousness and the subjects of parts of it... What is so powerful - and yet elusive of the nets of ordinary intellectual expectation - in *The Claim of Reason* is the way in which the activities of philosophizing become synecdochic, metonymic, and generally parabolic for the activities of the rest of life itself. It is the way in which the large (in English), unphilosophical, "poetic," or "religious" questions are elicited from their precise and technical microcosms that makes so much of this book poetical, but not "literary," philosophy', p. 586.

an important clue since one of the things Cavell does in this book is show his readers the limits of a certain kind of philosophical writing, a writing that is guided by a conception of philosophy as a set of problems. Problems raise expectations of solutions, which, on Cavell's account, are misplaced. The overweening ambition of philosophy feeds on sceptical questions that are unconquerable and present a flawed view of our intellectual and practical tasks. The alternative Cavell proposes is to understand philosophy as 'a set of texts'.³ What this means is not given at the outset but is left for the reader to discover by example, by following Cavell's own reading of Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations*. So we get an idea of philosophy as text through reading a philosophical text that is itself a reading of a philosophical text. This is no mere exercise in hermeneutic ingenuity. The matter that concerns Cavell is 'that the human creature's basis in the world as a whole is not what we think of as knowing' (CR 241). The failure of sceptically motivated inquiries into truth hints at what Cavell calls the 'truth of scepticism' namely that our relation to our world and our relation to each other is not primarily or fundamentally cognitive. The failure of such cognitive efforts discloses a moral landscape that is out of kilter and which Cavell wants to bring to our attention. He does so by incorporating in his reading of Wittgenstein readings of Shakespeare. He is 'pushed to pieces of literature', he explains, because of the way they present to us 'the problem of the other' (CR 476-7). This literary presentation of the problem is also a kind of knowledge. So if we are to engage with *The Claim of Reason*, a work of philosophy that is also about the limits of philosophy, we must find a way of getting hold of both its criticism of 'what we think of as knowing' and the knowledge it seeks to provide us with. Since this last is given through literary exemplification, it is quite fitting that as philosophical readers we expand our range of texts to discuss a literary text that meets Cavell's philosophical concerns from the other side so to speak, W. H. Auden's 'The Sea and the Mirror: A Commentary on Shakespeare's *The Tempest*'.

In the Shakespeare lectures he gave at the New School for Social Research in 1947, Auden remarked that in 'The Sea and the Mirror' he was 'attempting something which in a way is absurd, to show in a work of art, the limitations of art'.⁴ Written from 1942 to 1944, the poem is the fruit of Auden's sustained engagement with Shakespeare's work. Auden's poetic commentary, his reading, we might say, of *The Tempest*, gives voice to the sceptical truth of Shakespeare's play. The play ends its story of magic and

³ Stanley Cavell. *The Claim of Reason. Wittgenstein, Scepticism, Morality, and Tragedy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), p. 3, henceforth CR.

⁴ W.H. Auden, *The Sea and the Mirror. A Commentary on Shakespeare's The Tempest*, edited by Arthur Kirsch (Princeton & Oxford: University Press 2003), p.xi, henceforth Kirsch.

disillusion by breaking the spell it has on its audience, Prospero addresses us directly and entreating us to show our appreciation by applauding. And yet, having seen how enchantments fade, we are given no safe conduct to a *terra firma*; the 'baseless fabric' of the theatrical vision lingers.⁵ Auden's poem draws attention to its poetic fabric first by shifting poetic forms and then finally in the last chapter by switching from poetry to prose. This is no empty play: style is put to the task of telling a story of disillusion, of puncturing the ambition of a conception of poetry that does not countenance failure and measures its seriousness by its determination to be important. 'The Sea and the Mirror' is serious and ambitious by performing its own limitations for the reader. The poem overreaches itself and collapses into prose, a prose that thematises the problem of embodiment indirectly by speaking of the illusory character of art. But because in reading this we are still reading, we are still within the poem, artistic illusion contains a promise of emancipation from fantasies of humanity and hints at the possibility of a return to a human life that is more human, or what Auden calls 'mercy'.

What I hope to show in this essay is that Cavell's question is 'how do we get from philosophy to mercy?'. This, however, as Cavell, half-acknowledges, is an impossible question. By turning to Auden's poem we can get a different perspective on how such an impossible question might be approached and, in the end, left behind.

1. Philosophical style and the problem of scepticism

The Claim of Reason is a demanding book; it requires that the reader finds her way round a stylistically unfamiliar philosophical environment. Instead of clear statements of problems and procedures that might lead to their solution (or clarifications that might lead to their dissolution), we find digression, allusion, metaphor, citation, repetition. The deliberate thwarting of the philosophical reader's expectations can be frustrating. Anthony Kenny in his review of *The Claim of Reason* concluded that 'Despite Cavell's philosophical and literary gifts the book is a misshapen, undisciplined amalgam of ill assorted parts The exasperated reader might well put the book down and go no further'.⁶ We can see in Kenny's exasperation an expression of the limits set by a philosophical tradition premised on the pursuit of communicative transparency. Yet exasperation

⁵ W. H. Auden, 'The Sea and the Mirror. A Commentary on Shakespeare's *The Tempest*', in Edward Mendelson, ed., *W. H. Auden. Selected Poems* (London: Faber and Faber, 1979), henceforth *SP*

⁶ Cited in Mulhall, p. 1. Mulhall's Introduction is an extended meditation on reading that is also a subtle philosophical propaedeutic for reading *The Claim of Reason*. At the back cover of *The Claim of Reason*, a more sympathetic review is quoted from the *Review of Metaphysics* which emphasises Cavell's 'unique voice' his 'parenthetical aperçus, dazzling literary exegesis ... riddles, jokes, lists, fantasies'.

is also a sign of reading. It can therefore be seen also as an expression of the effort Cavell demands of his reader. Wittgenstein advised: 'Anything your reader can do for himself leave to him'.⁷ Cavell gives his reader a lot to do.

In time, the initial experience of style as hindering our understanding is transformed into an experience of being guided into a different way of looking at certain traditional philosophical problems. The philosophically trained reader who turns to the final and largest section of the book, 'Scepticism and the Problem of Others', is confronted with the chapter-heading 'Between Acknowledgement and Avoidance'. The re-phrasing of the familiar problem 'of other minds' as a problem of 'others' hints at the transformation of an epistemic into an ethical problem and prepares the reader for Cavell's diagnosis of the kind of failure he calls 'avoidance'. Cavell seeks both to explicate and to further the Wittgensteinian project of bringing the reader to recognise the 'false views of the inner and of the outer' that produce and sustain one another (CR 329). Recognising what is false involves crucially for Cavell engaging in a process of self-scrutiny and self-knowledge: the question 'who or what is the other?' — or 'is this in fact another?' — is tied to the question 'who or what am I, that I should be called upon to testify to such a question?' (CR 429).

Given this framework of interpretation, Cavell is able to discuss Wittgenstein's remarks on pain and privacy not as contributions to epistemology, but rather as elements in the laborious process of self-knowledge. Wittgenstein's familiar argument that pain is not a picture becomes thus transformed into a Rousseauian diagnosis of the relation 'between the soul and its society' (CR 329). A key reference is Wittgenstein's discussion of pain as an image: 'To say that "The picture of pain comes into the language-game with the words "Pain"' is a misunderstanding. The image of pain is no picture'.⁸ The traditional sceptical problem of pain references alluded to here drives a wedge between inner and outer. The quest for reliable access to someone else's inner state, for a clear and legible 'picture', gains its plausibility from the conviction that one has privileged access to one's own inner states (to use a different vocabulary: self-objectification is a condition for seeking the other as object). It is this conception of the inner as a secret and private domain that concerns Cavell. Elaborating on Wittgenstein's remarks, he

⁷ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value*, Peter Winch trans., (Oxford: Blackwell, 1980), p.77.

⁸ 'To the language-game with the words 'he is in pain' —we would like to say — belongs not merely the picture of the behaviour but also the picture of the pain... To say that "The picture of pain comes into the language-game with the words "Pain"', is a misunderstanding. The image of pain is no picture ... Certainly the image of the pain enters in a sense in the language-game; but not as a picture', Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophische Untersuchungen* (Frankfurt a.M: Suhrkamp, 1984), p. 375

reminds his audience of the expressive capacity of language and of bodies: 'My references to my pain are exactly expressions of pain itself; and my words refer to my pain just because, or to the extent, that they are (modified) expressions of it' (CR 342). To have a body, he continues, is to be 'condemned to expression, to meaning' (CR 357). Wittgenstein's observation that 'The human body is the best picture of the human soul' is thus interpreted as a reminder of the publicity of embodiment: 'The body is the field of expression of the soul', Cavell states, 'a human soul *has* a body' (CR 356).

The sceptical problem, however, is not simply dismissed as if it were a mere blunder. What motivates epistemic doubt about pain references and about the inner states of others is dissatisfaction with our social and socially embodied being. Scepticism can then be seen as expressive of a desire for disassociation from one another. Our 'working knowledge of one another's (inner) lives can reach no further than our (outward) expressions, and we have cause to be disappointed in these expressions' (CR 341). Talk of a hidden but known inner, and an observable but treacherous outer, is an expression of disappointed communication. It is this disappointment that motivates the attempt 'to account for and protect our separateness ...our unwillingness or incapacity either to know or to be known' (CR 369). The truth of the 'private language fantasy', Cavell argues, is that no language can fathom our privateness, no account can be given of our separateness: 'We are endlessly separate, for *no* reason' (CR 369). 'No reason' can mean that there is no convincing philosophical story we can tell about separateness - that it is a pseudo-problem. It can also mean that it is a dumb thing, unworthy of reason, this separateness of ours; or that there are no good reasons for separateness, but plenty of bad ones. In each case, our sceptical doubts and our attempts to refute them tell of 'how private we are, metaphysically and practically' (CR 370). But we just saw that we 'have cause' to be disappointed by our outward expressions. Are not failures of communication reason enough for separateness? What Cavell suggests is that the cause of the problem is no reason: to think that disappointed communication is reason for separateness is to enter the (fantastical) quest for a better more secure foundation for relating to one another. But this, Cavell tells us, is already to take a wrong path, for we are not facing a problem about knowledge or its absence. Our alienation from ourselves, which has as its symptom our search for a soul that is utterly secret and has a mysterious relation to our bodies, is itself a symptom of our alienation from our shared humanity: 'to be human is to be one of humankind, to bear an internal relation to all others' (CR 376).

If the issue is avoidance, the practical and metaphysical isolation that motivates the (misguided) search for potent anti-sceptical arguments, then clearly it cannot be addressed in the manner of traditional epistemology. The latter enters into it but only to the extent that the reader can be made to see that the problem is not knowledge but what Cavell calls 'acknowledgement'. The question is how best this problem can be addressed. As he often does in the course of *The Claim of Reason*, Cavell turns to literature to show how acknowledgement might be expressed:

What is it men in women do require
The lineaments of Gratified Desire
What is it women do in men require
The lineaments of Gratified Desire⁹

Blake's lyric, Cavell comments, speaks of a 'brave acceptance of the sufficiency of human finitude', its symmetrical structure intimates a perfect reciprocity and complete disappearance of disappointment in oneself and in others (CR 471). By contrast, the depth of our dissatisfaction with our finitude is measured by the degree of certainty we imagine would be sufficient to render us immune to our philosophically manufactured, hyperbolic doubts. In drawing the limits of the philosophical quest for knowledge, Cavell also draws the limits of a certain way of doing philosophy. From the perspective he seeks to open for us, the question 'Are you in pain?' is a question too many. When he says that 'the crucified human body is our best expression of the human soul' (CR 430), he is not just stating in the negative Wittgenstein's 'the human body is the best picture of the human soul'. He is also saying that avoidance too has a picture: a picture of suffering. The deeper philosophical problem about pain references is that we might observe the sighs, the tears and the clenched teeth, and continue to seek confirmation of the other's pain. This route will not bring epistemic success but frustration. Cavell makes the point by inviting us to see Othello as embodying the 'madness and bewitchment of inquisitors' (CR 469). Othello's 'rage for proof' leads to Desdemona's and to his own death. 'A statue, a stone is something whose existence is fundamentally open to the ocular proof ... A human being is not' and the dead bodies of Desdemona and Othello 'form an emblem of this fact, the truth of scepticism' (CR 495). The truth of scepticism is shown here as a tragic and wholly self-inflicted failure of acknowledgement.

⁹ William Blake, 'The Question Answered', in Michael Mason ed., *William Blake* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), p. 265, quoted in CR 471.

Philosophical dreams of absolute certainty and of intellectual impeccability are, Cavell suggests, analogously self-inflicted failures for which there is no clear remedy:

So we are here, knowing they are “gone to hell”, she with a lie on her lips, protecting him, he with her blood on him. Perhaps Blake has what he calls songs to win them back with, to make room for hell in a juster city. But can philosophy accept them back at the hands of poetry? Certainly not so long as philosophy continues, as it has from the first, to demand the banishment of poetry from its republic. Perhaps it could if it could itself become literature. But can philosophy become literature and still know itself? (CR 495).

2. Self-knowledge as a philosophical problem

The concluding questions of *The Claim of Reason* are puzzling and provocative. What Cavell presents as the truth of scepticism is the human capacity for inhumanity. This is a heavy charge. Elsewhere Cavell specifies that he is not concerned with any single sceptical argument but rather with ‘that radical doubt or anxiety expressed in Descartes and in Hume, and in Kant’s determination to transcend them, about whether we can know that the world exists and I and others in it’.¹⁰ One may well come to see such doubts as professional deformations of the philosopher and dismiss them as ‘cold, and strain’d, and ridiculous’ and turn to the practical engagements that dispel these clouds.¹¹ But this wholesomely limpid everyday is not the antidote we might expect. Alienating, hyperbolic philosophical doubt is allied to familiar, ordinary puzzles. Another of Blake’s lyrics, which Cavell does not cite, makes the point succinctly:

When a man has married a wife he finds out whether
Her knees and elbows are only glued together’.¹²

Blake’s words speak directly of our endless fascination with our kind, one another, our embodiment, the inner and outer that our bodies endow us with. Curiosity about who we are, and how others are, and how the world is feeds our skeptical doubts without turning us into murderous inquisitors.

The hyperbole in Cavell’s diagnosis can be seen as part of his argument: the challenge he presents us with is to confront scepticism as a practical matter *without* forfeiting the philosophical demand for self-knowledge. We

¹⁰ Stanley Cavell, ‘Emerson, Coleridge, Kant’, in John Rajchman and Cornel West, eds., *Post-analytic Philosophy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985), p. 84.

¹¹ David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, L. A. Selby-Bigge ed., (Oxford: Calrendon Press, 1949), p.269.

¹² William Blake, ‘When a man has married a wife’, in Mason, p. 280. For a philosophical argument on the relation between ordinary and philosophical doubt see Thompson Clarke, ‘The Legacy of Skepticism’, *Journal of Philosophy* 68 (1972), pp.754-69.

are not offered a choice between the ordinary labours of living and the splenetic exertions of philosophising. Leaving philosophy for a putatively untroubled everyday is to pile dreams upon dreams. The real question is about the possibilities of self-knowledge. This is where the issue arises again of how to proceed philosophically or indeed whether there is such a thing as philosophical self-knowledge. Here the textual evidence is ambiguous. We might be tempted to say that Cavell's writing has brought philosophy to a certain self-knowledge about its tasks and its limits and that his readers might possibly come to see certain things about their own philosophical ways. But at the same time, Cavell is 'pushed to pieces of literature' (CR 476) as if philosophical self-knowledge runs always the danger of turning to a problem about knowledge and a problem about the self and a problem about others. His final remarks suggest that as long as it is in pursuit of its own dream of self-grounding and of full self-accounting, philosophy is unable to accept gifts and treats poetic gifts with great suspicion. For philosophy to accept a gift it is to accept its limits. To do this involves, among other things, to acknowledge its traditional other, poetry. This is possible, Cavell hints, if philosophy 'could become literature' (CR 495). Yet clearly, to acknowledge someone is not to become this someone; Blake's image of perfect reciprocity, quoted earlier, is not a tautology. So for philosophy to acknowledge poetry it does not need to become literature. Indeed, we have been reading *The Claim of Reason* precisely as a philosophical work of poetic acknowledgement. So what are we to make of Cavell's final question?

Addressing philosophy as literature', Arthur Danto writes, 'is not meant to stultify the aspiration to philosophical truth so much as to propose a caveat against a reduced concept of reading'.¹³ There is of course a long philosophical tradition in which philosophy is not presented as a series of propositions to readers.¹⁴ James Conant describes this tradition as one 'in which the form of the philosophical text is thought to be integral to its purpose. The form of the text is modelled on a process of discovery'.¹⁵ The reader's relation to such philosophical texts can be captured thus: 'something is intended to happen to the reader other than, or in addition to, being informed', this 'something' can be described as 'acquiescence in a

¹³ Arthur C. Danto, 'Philosophy as/and/of Literature', in Rajchman and West, p.67.

¹⁴ An important argument for placing Platonic dialogues at the beginning of this tradition can be found in Stanley Rosen. *The Quarrel of Philosophy and Poetry: Studies in Ancient Thought* (London: Routledge, 1988).

¹⁵ James Conant 'Kierkegaard Wittgenstein and Nonsense', in Ted Cohen, Paul Guyer and Hilary Putnam eds., *Pursuits of Reason* (Lubbock: Texas Tech University Press, 1992), p. 195; see also James Conant 'Putting Two and Two Together: Kierkegaard, Wittgenstein and the Point of View for Their Work as Authors', in D.Z. Phillips ed., *The Grammar of Religious Belief* (New York: St. Martins Press, NY: 1996), p.5.

certain form of initiation and life'.¹⁶ To engage in philosophy in this manner, that is, to engage in it as a kind of activity, requires that the reader responds not only to what is said but to how it is said. It is by attending to the performatory aspect of the text – or what we called 'style' – that the reader becomes fully engaged. But this means that the reader attends to something that affects the argument which is not an argument. Following Alex Garcia-Düttmann one want to speak here of the basic 'good luck' in which the author puts his trust to get his argument through.¹⁷ Good luck, of course, is not something one can force, nor count on in advance. Cavell's concluding question appears both to articulate this difficulty ('can philosophy become literature?') and to throw into doubt the possibilities of self-knowledge that this kind of philosophical writing afford us ('...and still know itself?'). Another way of putting this is that serious communication, what Cavell calls philosophical education at the start of the book, may be impossible.¹⁸ The final question of the book is an expression of uncertainty, perhaps doubt, about the books own possibility. It is with this in mind that we may now to turn to a work that ends not with doubt about its possibility but with full admission of failure, yet this admission becomes a condition for a new set of possibilities.

3. Estrangement and conditions of mercy

The *Sea and the Mirror* is Auden's poetic commentary on *The Tempest*. Prospero's address to Ariel takes up Chapter I, then the other characters identified by their distinctive poetic idiom – sonnet, terza rima, sestina, villanelle (this last, notoriously tricky, form is the voice of Miranda)-¹⁹ speak their parts in Chapter II. Caliban breaks his silence in Chapter III addressing the imagined audience of the play, and the readers of the poem in prose. Commentary on the poem tends to focus on Auden's philosophical explorations and on the way these shape his reading of *The Tempest*. What interests me here is the way 'The Sea and the Mirror' articulates a poetic drama of self-knowledge, which culminates in the final self-recognition of audience and author that brings about a resolution of the problem of poetic self-knowledge and its limits. In a letter to Christopher Isherwood, Auden commented that his characters are 'on the sea (ie living

¹⁶ Danto, *ibid.*, 67.

¹⁷ The connection of art and 'good luck' is developed in Alex Garcia Düttmann, 'Arte fortunata – un "divertimento". Adorno, "l'arte delle arti"', *Iride* XVIII:44 (2005), pp. 157-163.

¹⁸ Cavell comments on Wittgenstein's thought that "To imagine a language means to imagine a form of life" and describes his own philosophy as an attempt to 'bring my own language and life into imagination [...] This seems to me a task that warrants the name of philosophy. It is also the description of something we might call education ... In this light, philosophy becomes education for grownups' (CR 124).

¹⁹ See *Kirsch* 83ff. Kirsch argues that the underlying theme of the poem is a Kierkegaardian opposition of the aesthetic and the ethical, see *Kirsch* xiiff.

existentially) but they have looked in the mirror' (Kirsch 82). This 'looking in the mirror' of the characters is presented as a process of self-alienation, meaning both estrangement from self and letting-go part of the self in a process of transformation and finally self-knowledge.²⁰ At the same time, this process encompasses the medium itself, so that poetry and its own transformative possibilities are at issue. The acknowledgement of the limits of poetry becomes a condition of poetic release.²¹

The pivotal passage occurs in Chapter III, where following a sudden change of register, we discover that the audience fail to applaud at the conclusion of Auden's retelling of the story. Breaking our expectations as readers of poetry, Auden has Caliban addressing directly the audience, speaking their and our thoughts, in order to diagnose our unease and finally release us. In the final soliloquy the readers of the poem see themselves as the audience of the play, who see themselves in the words of the actors, who are but poetic reflections of the author who looks thus back on himself and on the very process of self-reflection. This complex play of mirrors takes its cue from Shakespeare. In the Epilogue of *The Tempest*, Prospero addresses directly the audience, inviting them to applaud:

But release me from my bands
With the help of your good hands.
...As you from crimes would pardon'd be,
Let your indulgence set me free.²²

In Auden's poem, there is no release. At the play's end, players and audience remain captive. There is no pardon or mercy. Fittingly, it is Caliban who takes the stage to address the audience: 'Now it is over. No we have not dreamed it. Here we really stand, down stage with red faces and no applause' (*SP* 173).²³ In fastidious and elaborate prose, he breaks with the poetic idiom of the other characters. We are outside the poem, but not quite. Caliban puts the audience on the spot, speaks their thoughts - 'the begged question' - and, at the same time, responds to their 'bewildered cry' their dissatisfaction, and disappointment:

²⁰ Auden, W.H., *Lectures on Shakespeare*, Ed. Arthur C. Kirsch, (Princeton: University Press, 2002), 303.

²¹ In 'Balaam and the Ass', Auden writes about imagination as enabling us to become what we should become 'but, once imagination has done its work for me, to the degree that, with its help, I have become what I should become, imagination has a right to demand its freedom' (Kirsch 62). We can say that 'The Sea and the Mirror' explores an analogous relation to poetry, over and above the particular relations it traces between the key triad: Prospero, Caliban, Ariel. At the end of the poem poetry 'has done its work' and we, the readers have no right to ask more of it.

²² William Shakespeare, 'The Tempest' in C. H. Hereford ed., *The Works of Shakespeare*, vol.IV (London: Macmillan, 1902), Epilogue, ll 9-10, 19-20, p. 494.

²³ Auden recounts how he models Caliban's style on that of Henry James in *Lectures on Shakespeare*, p. 95. See also Herbert Greenberg, *Quest for the Necessary. W. H. Auden and the Dilemma of Divided Consciousness* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1968), p.123.

We must own [*for the present I speak your echo*] to a nervous perplexity not unmixed, frankly, with downright resentment. How *can* we grant the indulgence for which in his epilogue your personified type of the creative so lamely, tamely pleaded? Imprisoned, by you, in the mood doubtful, loaded, by you, with distressing embarrassments, we are, we submit, in no position to set *anyone* free (SP 149).

This admission of impotence that the poet magician – ‘your personified type of the creative’ – deals in smoke and mirrors fails to satisfy the audience for it suggests that in a tangle of illusion no-one has the power to set anyone free. The players cannot be released, if the audience does not applaud. But the audience cannot applaud because they are themselves ‘imprisoned’. And their captivity is made the more embarrassing by Caliban’s direct address.

What holds up the release of the audience? In other words, what is it that feeds the ‘mood doubtful’? Let us see what they witnessed so far. One way of looking at the poetic *peripeteia* of Auden’s characters is in terms of the trials of self-knowledge. In Auden’s hands the characters achieve self-knowledge by experiencing the loss of what they come to see as dreams, illusions, follies, and fantasies. We could say that the poem is made up of a series of discoveries of different kinds of avoidance, different ways of being private or of experiencing how private we are metaphysically and practically.²⁴ Here is Gonzalo, counsellor of ‘doubt and insufficient love’:

There was nothing to explain
Had I trusted the Absurd
And straightforward note by note
Sung exactly what I heard...
All would have begun to dance
Jigs of self-deliverance (SP 139, 140).

Here is his master, Alonso ‘once King of Naples’ advising his son:

Only your darkness can tell you what
A prince’s ornate mirror dare not ...
Learn from your dreams what you lack,
For as your fears are, so you must hope
The Way of Justice is a tightrope’ (SP 142).

Alonso’s advice comes out of his own acceptance of the Island’s magic, ‘where flesh and mind/ Are delivered from mistrust’ (SP 143). But perhaps the most powerful expression of this experience is to be found in Prospero.

²⁴ It is worth noting here that in the poetic ritornello that seal each of the characters poems ‘own’ rhymes with ‘alone’.

Prospero recounts his awakening into life as 'a sobbing dwarf' and confesses that 'I was not what I seemed' and that he used his magic to 'blot out for ever/ The gross insult of being one among many' (*SP* 130). Freedom comes with a new self-knowledge:

Now, Ariel, I am that I am, your late and lonely master,
Who knows now what magic is: -the power to enchant
That comes from disillusion (*SP* 130).

As he awakes into the human life that is given him, he awakes also to his finitude:

And suddenly now, and for the first time, am cold sober
With all my unanswered wishes and unwashed days
Stacked up all around my life; as if through the ages I had dreamed
About some tremendous journey I was taking,
.....And now in my old age, I wake, and this journey really exists,
And I have actually to take it' (*SP* 134).

As each character lets go their dreams, they each bid us farewell, leaving the stage ready for Caliban.

It has been argued that Auden is a poet of the 'divided consciousness', a condition Auden himself describes: 'Man's being is a copulative relation between a subject ego and a predicate self'.²⁵ The characters in the passages just quoted embark on the process of self-knowledge that allows them to get to grips with being a self that is both subject and predicate, something 'given, already there in the world, finite, derived, along with, related and comparable to other beings' (*ibid*). The anxiety of not being one among many, of not being deceived, of not being loved dissipates as each character awakes from their dreams of savvy, glory and power.

Still, our witness of these different journeys to self-knowledge does not suffice and does not satisfy. Our dissatisfaction, which manifests itself in the incapacity to applaud, is also a sign that we share in the players' captivity. Caliban renders this implicit self-knowledge explicit:

Our shame, our fear, our incorrigible stagginess, all wish and no resolve, are still, and more intensely than ever, all we have: only now it is not in spite of them but with them that we are blessed by the Wholly Other Life from which we are separated by an essential emphatic gulf of which our contrived fissures of mirror and proscenium arch –we understand them at last- are feebly figurative signs, so that all our meanings are reversed and it is precisely in its negative image of Judgment that we can positively

²⁵ W. H. Auden, 'The Enchafed Flood', cited in Herbert, p. 6.

envisage mercy; it is just here, among the ruins and the bones, that we may rejoice in the perfected Work which is not ours. ... the sounded note is the restored relation. (SP 173-4).

If the condition for release is self-knowledge, then this is as near to self-knowledge as we — actors and audience — can come. The indulgence demanded of the audience is at the same time a demand that the audience recognise the shared failure and reciprocal entailments of granting pardon: 'Everything, the massacres, the whippings, the lies, the twaddle, and all their carbon copies are still present' (SP 173). The negative judgement the audience delivers by failing to applaud forms part of its self-recognition, in that it is also a negative judgement on *itself*, an acknowledgement of its own shame, fear and incorrigible staginess. The failure to applaud is then a kind of self-knowledge. But if self-knowledge is possible, then release is possible. It is in the mutual recognition of captivity that the possibility of mutual deliverance takes shape, or, in Caliban's words, it is in the 'negative image of Judgement', the withheld applause, that we can 'positively envisage mercy'.

Significantly, the applause is still withheld. After all, it is not absorption in the play that shall deliver us of our various illusions. Caliban hints at the limits of this drama of self-knowledge and of mutual acknowledgement when he describes the predicament of the dramatist: 'Having learnt his language I begin to feel something of the serio-comic embarrassment of the dedicated dramatist, who in representing to you your condition of estrangement from the truth is doomed to fail the more he succeeds' (SP 171). Caliban's elaborate mode of address already marks a sobering distance between players and audience, or poem and readers. This distance allows us to reflect on how the desire for self-knowledge — here, to see ourselves reflected in the words of the poem, to recognise ourselves in the play — can itself be an obstacle to self-knowledge. We can now re-interpret the final question with which Cavell leaves his readers, as drawing our attention not to the difficulties of philosophical acknowledgement, but to the difficulties of self-knowledge. Caliban's unsentimental address to the audience articulates an attempt to emancipate us from the poem, for which it is essential that we cease to recognise ourselves in it. Put differently, by witnessing how poetry seeks to exceed itself and thus finds its ambitions curtailed and shaped prosaically, we are given a chance to learn something about illusion and disillusion. To say, this is just a mirror, not the real thing, is something we learn in the play but it is also a final 'negative image of Judgment' in which 'we can positively envisage mercy'.