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STANLEY CAVELL

Epistemology and Tragedy: A Reading of Othello *(Together with a cover letter)*

Dear Alceste,

THEY'RE THINKING ABOUT YOU AGAIN, the good ones. Can you imagine why? I will not disguise from you my conviction that your position is intellectually indefensible. What more really can you say on your behalf but that human society is filled with show, with artifice, with insincerity, with dissociations between the public and the private, between the outer and the inner? And what more really need be said in reply to you than to concede this, and whatever follows from it, as the nature of human society, as the very essence of the civilized; and then simply request that you—what? Let us not say either love civilization or leave it. The request is rather that you not be illogical: if you do decide to join the human race; or let me say, to take your place in society; then do not complain that you will not by that act have rejoined the world of nature. It need not be denied that in this decision something is lost. But need you deny that something is gained, something indeed human? To see these two sides is just to grow up, something you are heartily advised to do.

Why is this not the end of the matter? The fact that it is not the end is what I take the issue of hypocrisy to be about, what it is that keeps it an issue. The issue is not so much why you are not convinced by the better arguments of the others. That sort of impasse is hardly news in human affairs. The issue is rather why the others care that you are not convinced. You are without power. What is your hold upon them? What do you represent to them?

Perhaps you imagine that you represent purity to their compromise and corruption. I think it would be closer to the truth to say that you represent purity to their purity, or to their sense of their purity lost—not as if corrupted exactly but as if misplaced, thus still present somehow. Purity and innocence are no doubt dangerous ingredients in society, rarely making a bad situation as good as it can be, often making it as bad as it can be, unable to listen to reason. But like virginity itself, innocence ought to be put aside in its own good time; which is to say, in a time and place of its own consent. In a happy world purity will itself know its time and its place. But suppose it does not? Suppose that the world is not happy. Purity can only know by its own heart and by the encouragement of what draws it. So if I maintain the right of experience to its argu-

ments for consent, I equally maintain the right of innocence to give and to withhold its consent without argument, on the basis of its feeling, its sense of itself. The world needs that sense, requires that you say, willingly, that the world is good enough to want to live in. And I assume that in general you, in general youth, wish to want the world; which is to say: you wish to be presented with a world you can want, to which you give yourself. Why would you not?

Let us leave aside the possibility that you are neurotic, or tyrannical. Let us assume that you may be right, that the world as it is, is not wantable, or not acceptable. Let us also leave aside the possibility that you are a victim of political injustice, either privately or as the member of a victimized class or race. In so much as acknowledging that there may be room left, beyond private or public injustice, for refusing the world, I am, you see, showing the side of me that sides with you. (This implies that there is a part of me that parts with you. I'll come to that.) Then what room is left? How could the world as a whole present itself, to one's feeling, as uninhabitable? *What* is the feeling?

Evidently it must be understood as a mode of disgust, a repugnance at the idea that your life should partake of the world's, that what it does, you do; or is it at the idea that the world's life partakes of yours, that what you feel, it feels? I am not going to try now to define further or to assess such ideas. I am writing merely to reaffirm that I believe in the potential epistemological significance of this mode of disgust (recognizing always, as one always has to add in our day, that the significance may only be psychological, as if we knew what distinction we had in mind). Like Hamlet before you (with his sensitivity to odor, to the rotting), and like the romantics and the existentialists after you, you represent the discovery of adolescence, of that moment at which the worth of adulthood is—except, I suppose, to deep old age—most clearly exposed; at which adulthood *is* the thing you are asked to choose, to consent to. Naturally your choice will be based on insufficient evidence. But woe to them that believe the choice is easy, that in foregoing adolescence you forego little of significance. They have merely forgotten what they have lost, as they have forgotten the loss of childhood, a matter of comparable significance. (Freud, to whom you should be introduced, means something like this, or ought to mean it, by speaking of human sexual development as having two phases, the second of which, after a period of latency, recapitulates the first.)

The idea here, that when the world's legitimacy comes to rest upon consent—when the public world is something that each individual has at some moment to agree to join—that then adolescence is invented as the time of preparing for that agreement, and is ended by it; this idea is confirmed in the thought of hypocrisy, a word which says something about playing a role but which at the same time derives from a sense of measured separation from something, say a sense of dissociation. The hypocrite would dissociate himself or herself from a life of human vulnerabilities, call it human nature; the anti-hypocrite would dissociate himself or herself from a world of invulnerable pretenses. If adolescence will level the most unforgiving charge of hypocrisy at those ahead of it, it will level against itself an equally unforgiving charge of fraudulence—and the one because of the other. The world posed before it, beckoning it, is a field of possibilities, toward which curiosity is bound to out-

reach commitment. It is inherently a time of theater, of self-consciousness presented as embarrassment, of separation from the familiar, of separation from the self, as if something were tearing; of a scrutiny that claims to know everything directing itself upon feelings and actions that can claim to know nothing. It is a time containing the reversal of rites of passage: the tribe shifts the responsibility for its pain from its back onto yours; and instead of opening secrets to you, it informs you that it has none, that what you see is all there is to it. Hence to its recruits it is now reduced merely to *saying* "Grow up."

I have several reasons for wanting to be in touch with you now. First, my old friend Judith Shklar is saying publicly that you finally lost the woman you love. This implies at the least that C elim ene is right to refuse your offer of marriage with its condition that she abandon the remainder of the world, that she find the whole world in you. So I have to tell you that I agree with this verdict and will say so publicly. I will, however, go on to claim that the more significant fact, the mystery of your misanthropy, is that C elim ene loves you, that they all love you, Arsino e as well as Philinte; that they do not give you up but end their play by going to seek you out. Quite as if they think you are right, even if placed in the wrong, and cannot want to live without the thing you mean to them. And yet what? They find you too difficult or too hard. Is that your problem or theirs?

Second, the side of me that sides with you has in recent years repeatedly found itself siding with those for whom the relation of innocence and experience is their life, call it the relation between their past of possibilities and the present actuality of the world, or between their memories of being disappointed and their fears of being disappointing. Thoreau is talking about this relation in this passage from the chapter "Spring" in *Walden*. "While such a sun holds out to burn, the vilest sinner may return. Through our own recovered innocence we discern the innocence of our neighbors. You may have known your neighbor yesterday for a thief, a drunkard, or a sensualist, and merely pitied or despised him, and despaired of the world; but the sun shines bright and warm this first spring morning, re-creating the world. . . . There is not only an atmosphere of good will about him, but even a savor of holiness groping for expression." Emerson, I now believe to his credit, can barely let the issue alone, the issue of consenting to the world. It is this fact of his perpetual youth, calling to the perpetual youth in us, more than his incessant sagacity about it, that keeps Emerson so annoying to good society. For example, in the Swedenborg chapter of *Representative Men*: "The human mind stands ever in perplexity, demanding intellect, demanding sanctity, impatient equally of each without the other. The reconciler has not yet appeared." We may have imagined that it is hard to be known for a sinner, and may have feared scandal from *that* quarter. It proves harder to be known for a saint, hard to forgive the one who knows it of us. This, I feel sure, is something Nietzsche loved Emerson for. Zarathustra says to the young man from whom he has elicited the confession that he has been destroyed by his envy of Zarathustra: "Yes, I know your peril. But, by my love and hope I entreat you: do not reject your love and hope! You still feel yourself noble, and the others, too, who dislike you and cast evil glances at you, still feel you are noble. Learn that everyone finds the noble man an obstruction. . . . Alas, I

have known noble men who lost their highest hope. And henceforth they slandered all high hopes. . . . But, by my love and hope I entreat you: do not reject the hero in your soul! Keep holy your highest hope.”

One day soon I mean to write to you about Dušan Makavejev’s last film, which he calls *Sweet Movie*. It is, among other things, the most original exploration known to me of the endless relations between documentary and fictional film, incorporating both; hence an original exploration of the endless relations between reality and fantasy. The conscience of the film is most hideously captured in the Nazi film footage of German troops exhuming bodies from mass graves in the Katyn Forest. A lifelong participant in a society of socialist aspirations, Makavejev is asking: Was my revolution capable even of this? Has it cannibalized everything that has touched it? Is it true that the Red Army committed a mass murder of the Polish officer corps in order to replenish it with more favorable personnel? The film shows a card which contains Anthony Eden’s response: “Let us think of these things always. Let us speak of them never.” For Makavejev, that conspiracy of silence—call it mass hypocrisy—is a prescription for self-administered poison. Mere film cannot alone prove who caused and buried the corpses in the Katyn Forest, but this film can directly and by itself break the conspiracy of silence about it. *Sweet Movie* is a work that attempts to extract hope from the very fact that we are capable of genuine disgust at the world; that this disgust is to be understood as our revoltedness, as our chance of cleansing revulsion, that the fight for freedom continues to originate in the demands of our instincts. It is a work powerful enough to encourage us to think again that the tyrant’s power continues to require our complicitous tyranny over ourselves. I would expect you, dear Alceste, to be capable of tears when, at the end of Makavejev’s film, he allows a young boy who is fictionally dead, wrapped in plastic sheets and laid on a river bank, to resurrect and to declare himself as the young actor playing this part, thus exhuming his younger self, his innocent sincerity. He then directs this figure to look out from the screen and hence to confront his older self, his artistry, his experience as a filmmaker, a consenting adult in a world of horrors (thus, as Rousseau and Thoreau perceive, a conspirator of that world, chained by partialities) confronting himself with the chance to forgive himself, hence with the chance to start again.

You see that I would try to tempt you back, to tell you that there are those in the world who have not forgotten what you know, hence who feel the rebuke in your taking offense. But it is up to you and to us in our separate ways; it is pointless to beg, and this is not the time to harangue. The final reason I write now is to provide a cover for showing you something I have been thinking about *Othello*.¹

My thoughts about it conclude a very long manuscript having to do principally with a topic close to your heart, namely whether, and on what basis, we must acknowledge the existence of other human beings. These thoughts picture Othello as, in various ways, a semblable of yours, one who demands being the whole world to the woman he loves, as some sort of price for his joining her in wedlock. My tale is cautionary. To you it warns that a mind and a character as pure and grand as Othello’s may, in its isolation, fall to wallowing in littleness. Of the world my tale asks watchfulness over itself, over its ability to encourage

and to protect the innocent. Say Othello's ugliness was to have gone the limit in murdering his love and his hope, the hero in his soul. But his beauty was to have had such a love and such high hopes. Like Lear, he confuses the private and the public, the erotic and the political, distorting both. But who finds himself in a position to correct them? Who is prepared to advise them to grow up? Halting the brawl on Cyprus, Othello asks how it happened, concluding: "What? In a town of war / Yet wild, the people's hearts brimful of fear, / To manage private and domestic quarrel? / In night, and on the court and guard of safety? / 'Tis monstrous. Iago, who began't?" (II, iii, 212-216) When these questions turn upon him, he will turn upon himself.

My thoughts also relate *Othello* to some passages from Montaigne, someone I have several times wanted to bring you together with. Montaigne is appalled by the human capacity for horror at the human. I think I know what he means and I think you do too. But the world during my lifetime rather shows that it is yet more horrible to lose this capacity for horror. Judith Shklar's essay is guided and colored by experiences of the world war of the forties and the local wars of the sixties. How could it not be? But aren't Nazis those who have lost the capacity for being horrified by what they do? They are our special monsters for *that* reason, monsters of adaptability. (Who knows whether what they did, apart from scale, was really that different from what others have done? Who knows whether the only real Nazis were created by a particular time and place and by a particular set of leaders and led? Who does not know that Nazism cannot succeed apart from the human capacity for *going along*? And what political thinker does not recognize that most of us will mostly go along with the tide of events, and even argue that we [mostly] ought to? But who does not see that there must be *some* limit to this? I am saying that Nazism specifically turns this human capacity for adapting into a mockery of itself, a mockery of being human.) And was hypocrisy really the charge that the students brought against America the other day? Their claim was to be in revolt because revolted, because horrified, by what they were asked to consent to. I do not raise the question whether their response was pure. My question here is whether one is prepared to credit revulsion and horror as conceivably political responses, as perhaps the only epistemological access to the state of the world; as possible forms of conscience. Or is every attempt to deny the political, deny it supremacy, as it has become, in human life, as it has become, to be dismissed as (anti-) hypocritical?

If youth cannot over a period of time make itself clear to age, this is tragic for both. I once described this situation as one in which society cannot hear its own screams. The nation was living then in the dissociated state of a foreign and incomprehensible war and I was, at the time I speak of, trying, defiantly if unsuccessfully, to conclude a private essay about *King Lear*, another dissociated world. (This is a play in which each of two fathers produces the image of parents cannibalizing their children. *Sweet Movie* is gorged with images of this fate.) Evidently I was going around in those days, as one did, subject to fits of hearing screams in my ears. Others sometimes may have thought me mad; I sometimes thought they were driving me mad. I did not, I believe, think they were hypocrites, though it is perfectly true that I thought something was wrong with them (even ones I loved, even ones I had tremendous hopes for, like Lyndon Johnson), and true that I did not want to hear their arguments again. What al-

lowed me to continue writing my essay was the idea of including in it a love letter to America, though its anguish at the tragedy of America might have struck some to whom it was addressed as written out of hatred.

Montaigne seems, if I understand you both, to share your view of the exclusiveness of friendship, hence to be another of the most private of men; and yet somehow he puts this together with sociability. He invented, in inventing the essay, an intimate discourse for addressing strangers. He calls those whom he addresses his “relatives and friends,” and so they are, after his discourse has made them so (which it does in part by showing its strangeness to them, hence their strangeness to him, so that they may understand that there is something yet for them to become familiar with). Isn’t this a staggering thing when we remember our fathers? We may have known them not to have had the education they provided for us, and sometimes felt their heartiness as well as their melancholy to be bullying, to run roughshod over our subtleties. But I remember instances of my father in conversation with strangers—in a shop, a lobby, a train—animated, laughing, comparing notes, when the charge of insincerity fell from my grasp and I would gaze at his behavior as at a mystery. How can he care enough what the other thinks to be provident of his good feeling, and yet not care so terribly as to become unable to provide it? What skill enables him to be the one that puts the other at ease, and where did he acquire it? He knew no more about the other than the other knew about him. He seemed merely able to act on what nobody could fail to know, and to provide what nobody could fail to appreciate, even if in a given moment they could not return it. Call it sociability. At such a time I felt it would be happy to have my father as an acquaintance, to be treated by him to a serious regard, if somewhat external, for my comfort and opinion; to count not as an intimate but as an equal. The very need of formality, of ceremony, would all at once seem to me freeing, and for a while I glimpsed a splendor, a tenderness, in the idea of the sociable.

If you want further communication after the *Othello* material, it is not as hard as some of my acquaintances make out to find out where I am.²

* * *

The last part of the book³ of which my reading of *Othello* takes the last pages is in effect a meditation on the relation between the title concepts of the two concluding essays of my book *Must We Mean What We Say?*—“Knowing and Acknowledging” and “The Avoidance of Love: A Reading of *King Lear*”—that is, a meditation on the reciprocity between acknowledgment and avoidance, hence between skepticism and tragedy. In particular, the reading of *Othello* is the most detailed of several moments I choose in Shakespeare from which to study the imagination of the body’s fate in the progress of skepticism.

To orient ourselves, let us begin by considering briefly how it is that we are to understand, at the height of *The Winter’s Tale*, Hermione’s reappearance as a statue. Specifically I ask how it is that we are to understand Leontes’s acceptance of the “magic” that returns her to flesh and blood, and hence to him. This is a most specific form of resurrection. Accepting it means accepting the idea that she had been turned to stone; that that was the right means for her disappearance from life. So I am asking for the source of Leontes’s conviction in

the rightness of that fate. Giving the question that form, the form of my answer is by now predictable: for her to return to him is for him to acknowledge her; and for him to acknowledge her is for him to acknowledge his relation to her; in particular to acknowledge what his denial of her has done to her, hence to him. So Leontes recognizes the fate of stone to be the consequence of his particular skepticism. One can see this as the projection of his own sense of numbness, of living death. But then why was this *his* fate? It is a most specific form of remorse or of (self-) punishment.

Its environment is provided by a tale of harrowing by jealousy, and a consequent accusation of adultery—an accusation known by everyone else to be insanely false. Hence Leontes is inevitably paired with Othello. I call attention to two further ways in which *The Winter's Tale* is a commentary on *Othello*, and therefore contrariwise. First, both plays involve a harrowing of the power of knowing the existence of another (as chaste, intact, as what the knower knows his other to be). Leontes refuses to believe a true oracle; Othello insists on believing a false one. Second, in both plays the consequence for the man's refusal of knowledge of his other is an imagination of stone. It is not merely an appetite for beauty that produces Othello's most famous image of his victim as a piece of cold and carved marble (" . . . whiter skin of hers than snow, / And smooth, as monumental alabaster"). Where does his image come from?

Before I can give my answer I still need one further piece of orientation in thinking of tragedy as a kind of epistemological problem, or as the outcome of the problem of knowledge—of the dominance of modern philosophical thought by the problem of knowledge. Earlier, in meditating on the existence of other minds, I was led to ask how we are to understand the other as having displaced or absorbed the weight of God, the task of showing me that I am not alone in the universe. I was claiming there to be giving a certain derivation for the problem of the other. But I was also echoing one formulation Descartes gives his motive in wanting to find what is beyond doubt, namely, to know beyond doubt that he is not alone in the world (Third Meditation). Now I ask, in passing but explicitly, why it is Descartes does not try to defeat that possibility of isolation in what would seem the directest and surest way, by locating the existence of one other finite being.

He says simply that he can easily imagine that ideas "which represent men similar to myself" could be "formed by the combination of my other ideas, of myself, of corporeal objects, and of God, even though outside of me there were no other men in the world. . . ." He is, of course, setting up a powerful move toward God. And we can gather from this—something that seems borne out in the sequel of this piece of writing—that the problem of others (other finite beings) is not discovered, or derived, by Descartes to be a special problem of knowledge; this is surely one reason it would not have been discovered to be such in subsequent epistemology. However, the more one meditates on the unique place Descartes makes for his relation to his own body, the less clear and distinct it is that he has available to himself the formulation of the idea of another body as having a unique relation to its mind, in that special quasi-substantial way that he asserts is not like the way a ship is related to its pilot. But without such an idea, what is the content of the idea of "men similar to myself"? I do not

conceive of Descartes's appealing to the route of analogy here, since he must be far surer that other human bodies go with minds than any sureness he can extract by inferring from another body's behavior alone. After all, the body has essentially nothing to do with the soul! In the light of this passing of the question of the other, a change is noticeable in the coda Descartes supplies his argument at the end of this third meditation:

The whole force of the argument I have here used to prove the existence of God consists in the fact that I recognize that it would not be possible for my nature to be what it is, possessing the idea of a God, unless God really existed—the same God, I say, the idea of whom I possess, the God who possesses all these high perfections . . . [who] cannot be a deceiver . . .

The main point of summary is that I could not have produced the idea I have of God, for it can have come from nothing less than God himself. But a new note of necessity is also struck, that without the presence of this idea in myself, and (hence) the presence of the fact of which it is the imprint, my own nature would necessarily not be what it is. So not only the fact, as it were, of my existence, but the integrity of it, depends on this idea. (And so these meditations are about the finding of self-knowledge after all; of the knowledge of a human self by a human self.)

That the integrity of my (human, finite) existence may depend on the fact and on the idea of another being's existence, and on the possibility of *proving* that existence—an existence conceived from my very dependence and incompleteness, hence conceived as perfect, and conceived as producing me “in some sense, in [its] own image”—these are thoughts that take me to a study of *Othello*.

Briefly, to begin with, we have the logic, the emotion, and the scene of skepticism epitomized. The logic: “My life upon her faith” (I, iii, 295) and “. . . when I love thee not / Chaos is come again” (III, iii, 91-92) set up the stake necessary to best cases; the sense I expressed by the imaginary major premise, “If I know anything, I know this.” One standing issue about the rhythm of *Othello*'s plot is that the progress from the completeness of Othello's love to the perfection of his doubt is too precipitous for the fictional time of the play. But such precipitousness is just the rhythm of skepticism; all that is necessary is the stake. The emotion: Here I mean not exactly Othello's emotion toward Desdemona, call it jealousy; but rather the structure of his emotion as he is hauled back and forth across the keel of his love. Othello's enactment, or sufferance, of that torture is the most extraordinary representation known to me of the “astonishment” in skeptical doubt. In the First Meditation we read: “I realize so clearly that there are no conclusive indications by which waking life can be distinguished from sleep that I am quite astonished, and my bewilderment is such that it is almost able to convince me that I am sleeping.” (It does not follow that one is *convinced* that one is awake.) When Othello loses consciousness (“Is 't possible? —Confess? —Handkerchief? —Oh, devil!” [IV, i, 43-44]), it is not from conviction in a piece of knowledge but in an effort to stave the knowledge off. The scene: Here I have in mind the pervasive air of the language and the action of this play as one in which Othello's mind continuously outstrips reality, dissolves it in trance or dream or in the beauty or ugliness of his incantatory

imagination; in which he visualizes possibilities that reason, unaided, cannot rule out. Why is he beyond aid? Why are the ear and the eye in him disjoined? We know that by the time he formulates his condition this way:

By the world,
I think my wife be honest, and think she is not.
I think that thou art just, and think thou art not.
I'll have some proof . . .

(III, iii, 383-386)

he is lost. Two dozen lines earlier he had demanded of Iago "the ocular proof," a demand which was no purer a threat than it was a command, as if he does indeed wish for this outcome, as if he has a use for Iago's suspicions, hence a use for Iago that reciprocates Iago's use of him. Nothing I claim about the play here will depend on an understanding of the relation between Iago and Othello, so I will simply assert what is suggested by what I have just said, that such a question as "Why does Othello believe Iago?" is badly formed. It is not conceivable that Othello believes Iago and *not* Desdemona. Iago, we might say, offers Othello an opportunity to believe something, something to oppose to something else he knows. What does he know? Why does it require opposition? What do we know?

We have known (say since G. Wilson Knight's "The Othello Music") that Othello's language, call it his imagination, is at once his and the play's glory, and his shame; the source of his power and of his impotence; or we should have known (since Bradley's *Shakespearean Tragedy*) that Othello is the most romantic of Shakespeare's heroes, which may be a way of summarizing the same facts. And we ought to attend to the perception that Othello is the most Christian of the tragic heroes (expressed in Norman Rabkin's *Shakespeare and the Common Understanding*). Nor is there any longer any argument against our knowledge that Othello is black; and there can be no argument with the fact that he has just married, nor with the description, compared with the case of Shakespeare's other tragedies, that this one is not political but domestic.

We know more specifically, I take it, that Othello's blackness means something. But what specifically does it mean? Mean, I mean, to him—for otherwise it is not Othello's color that we are interested in but some generalized blackness, meaning perhaps "sooty" or "filthy," as elsewhere in the play. This difference may show in the way one takes Desdemona's early statement: "I saw Othello's visage in his mind" (I, iii, 253). I think it is commonly felt that she means she overlooked his blackness in favor of his inner brilliance; and perhaps further felt that this is a piece of deception, at least of herself. But what the line more naturally says is that she saw his visage as he sees it, that she understands his blackness as he understands it, as the expression (or in his word, his manifestation) of his mind—which is not overlooking it. Then how does he understand it?

As the color of a romantic hero. For he, as he was and is, manifested by his parts, his title, and his "perfect soul" (I, ii, 31), is the hero of the tales of romance he tells, some ones of which he wooed and won Desdemona with, others of which he will die upon. It is accordingly the color of one with enchanted powers and magical protection, but above all it is the color of one of purity, of a perfect soul. Desdemona, in entering his life, hence in entering his story of his

life, enters as a fit companion for such a hero; his perfection is now opened toward hers. His absolute stake in his purity, and its confirmation in hers, is shown in what he feels he has lost in losing Desdemona's confirmation:

. . . My name, that was as fresh
As Dian's visage, is now begrimed and black
As mine own face . . .

(III, iii, 386-388)

Diana's is a name for the visage Desdemona saw to be in Othello's mind. He loses its application to his own name, his charmed self, when he no longer sees his visage in Desdemona's mind but in Iago's, say in the world's capacity for rumor. To say he loses Desdemona's power to confirm his image of himself is to say that he loses his old power of imagination. And this is to say that he loses his grasp of his own nature; he no longer has the same voice in his history. So then the question becomes: How has he come to displace Desdemona's imagination with Iago's? However terrible the exchange, it must be less terrible than some other. Then we need to ask not so much how Iago gained his power as how Desdemona lost hers.

We know, one gathers, that Desdemona has lost her virginity, the protection of Diana, by the time she appears to us. And surely Othello knows this! But this change in her condition, while a big enough fact to hatch millennia of plots, is not what Othello accuses her of. (Though would that accusation have been much more unfair than the unfaithfulness he does accuse her of?) I emphasize that I am assuming that in Othello's mind the theme and condition of virginity carry their full weight within a romantic universe. Here is Northrop Frye, writing on the subject recently: "Deep within the stock convention of virgin-baiting is a vision of human integrity imprisoned in a world it is in but not of, often forced by weakness into all kinds of ruses and stratagems, yet always managing to avoid the one fate which really is worse than death, the annihilation of one's identity. . . . What is symbolized as a virgin is actually a human conviction, however expressed, that there is something at the core of one's infinitely fragile being which is not only immortal but has discovered the secret of invulnerability that eludes the tragic hero" (*The Secular Scripture*, p. 86).

Now let us consolidate what we know in this sketch so far. We have to think in this play not merely about marriage but about the marriage of a romantic hero and of a Christian man, one whose imagination has to incorporate the idea of two becoming one in marriage and the idea that it is better to marry than to burn. It is a play, though it is thought of as domestic, in which not a marriage but an idea of marriage, or let us say an imagination of marriage, is worked out. "Why did I marry?" is the first question Othello asks himself, to express his first raid of suspicion (III, iii, 242). The question has never been from his mind. Iago's first question to him is "Are you fast married?" and Othello's first set speech ends with something less than an answer: "But that I love the gentle Desdemona, / I would not my unhoused free condition / Put into circumscription and confine / For the sea's worth." Love is at most a necessary, not a sufficient, condition for marrying. And for some minds, a certain idea of love may compromise as much as validate the idea of marriage. It may be better, but it is not perfect to marry, as Saint Paul implies.

We have, further, to think in this play not merely generally of marriage but specifically of the wedding night. It is with this that the play opens. The central fact we know is that the whole beginning scene takes place while Othello and Desdemona are in their bridal bed. The simultaneity is marked: "Even now, now, very now, an old black ram / Is tupping your white ewe . . ." (I, i, 88). And the scene is one of treachery, alarms, of shouts, of armed men running through a sleeping city. The conjunction of the bridal chamber with a scene of emergency is again insisted on by Othello's reappearance from his bedroom to stop a brawl with his single presence; a reappearance repeated the first night in Cyprus. As though an appearance from his place of sex and dreams is what gives him the power to stop an armed fight with a word and a gesture. Or is this more than we know? Perhaps the conjunction is to imply that their "hour of love" (I, iii, 299-300), or their two hours, have each time been interrupted. There is reason to believe that the marriage has not been consummated, anyway reason to believe that Othello does not know whether it has. What is Iago's "Are you fast married?" asking? Whether a public, legal ceremony has taken place or whether a private act; or whether the public and the private have ratified one another? Othello answers by speaking of his nobility and his love. But apart from anything else this seems to assume that Iago's "you" was singular, not plural. And what does Othello mean in Cyprus by these apparently public words:

. . . Come, my dear love,
The purchase made, the fruits are to ensue—
The profit's yet to come 'tween me and you.

(II, iii, 8-10)

What is the purchase and what the fruits or profit? Othello has just had proclaimed a general celebration at once of the perdition of the Turkish fleet and of his nuptials (II, ii). If the fruits and profit is the resumption of their privacy, then the purchase was the successful discharge of his public office and his entry into Cyprus. But this success was not his doing; it was provided by a tempest. Is the purchase their (public) marriage? Then the fruits and profit is their conjugal love. Then he is saying that this is yet to come. It seems to me possible that the purchase, or price, was her virginity, and the fruits or profit their pleasure. There could hardly be greater emphasis on their having had just one shortened night together, isolated from this second night by a tempest (always in these matters symbolic, perhaps here of a memory, perhaps of an anticipation). Or is it, quite simply, that this is something he wishes to *say* publicly, whatever the truth between them? (How we imagine Desdemona's reaction to this would then become all important.)

I do not think that we must, or that we can, choose among these possibilities in Othello's mind. Rather, I think Othello cannot choose among them. My guiding hypothesis about the structure of the play is that the thing *denied our sight* throughout the opening scene—the thing, the scene, that Iago takes Othello back to again and again, retouching it for Othello's enchafed imagination—is what we are shown in the final scene, the scene of murder. This becomes our ocular proof of Othello's understanding of his two nights of married love. (It has been felt from Thomas Rymer to G. B. Shaw that the play obeys the rhythm of

farce, not of tragedy. One might say that in beginning with a sexual scene denied our sight, this play opens exactly as a normal comedy closes, as if it turned comedy inside out.) I will follow out this hypothesis here only to the extent of commenting on that final scene.

However one seeks to interpret the meaning of the great entering speech of the scene ("It is the cause, it is the cause, my soul. . . . Put out the light, and then put out the light" [V, ii, 1, 7]), I cannot take its mysteries, its privacies, its magniloquence, as separate from some massive denial to which these must be in service. Othello must mean that he is acting impersonally, but the words are those of a man in a trance, in a dream-state, fighting not to awaken; willing for anything but light. By "denial" here I do not initially mean something requiring psychoanalytical, or any other, theory. I mean merely to ask that we not, conventionally but insufferably, assume that we know this woman better than this man knows her—making Othello some kind of exotic, gorgeous, superstitious lunkhead; which is about what Iago thinks. However much Othello deserves each of these titles, however far he believes Iago's tidings, he cannot just believe them; somewhere he also *knows* them to be false. This is registered in the rapidity with which he is brought to the truth, with no further real evidence, with only a counter-story (about the handkerchief) that bursts over him, or from him, as the truth. Shall we say he recognizes the truth too late? The fact is, he recognizes it when he is ready to, as one alone can; in this case, when its burden is dead. I am not claiming that he is trying not to believe Iago, or wants not to believe what Iago has told him. (This might describe someone who, say, had a good opinion of Desdemona, not someone whose life is staked upon hers.) I am claiming, on the contrary, that we must understand Othello to be wanting to believe Iago, to be trying, against his knowledge, to believe him. Othello's eager insistence on Iago's honesty, his eager slaking of his thirst for knowledge with that poison, is not a sign of his stupidity in the presence of poison but of his devouring need of it. I do not quite say that he could not have accepted slander about Desdemona so quickly, to the quick, unless he already believed it; but rather that it is a thing he would rather believe than something yet more terrible to his mind; that the idea of Desdemona as an adulterous whore is more convenient to him than the idea of her as chaste. But what could be more terrible than Desdemona's faithlessness? Evidently her faithfulness. But how?

Note that in taking Othello's entering speech as part of a ritual of denial, in the context of taking the murder scene as a whole to be a dream-enactment of the invisible opening of the play, we have an answer implied to our original question about this play, concerning Othello's turning of Desdemona to stone. His image denies that he scarred her and shed her blood. It is a denial at once that he has taken her virginity and that she has died of him. The whole scene of murder is built on the concept of sexual intercourse or orgasm as a dying. There is a dangerously explicit quibble to this effect in the exchange,

Oth. Thou art on thy death bed.
Des. Aye, but not yet to die.

(V, ii, 51-52)

The possible quibble only heightens the already heartbreaking poignance of the wish to die in her marriage bed after a long life.

Though Desdemona no more understands Othello's accusation of her than, in his darkness to himself, he does, she obediently shares his sense that this is their final night and that it is to be some dreamlike recapitulation of their former two nights. This shows in her premonitions of death (the Willow Song, and the request that one of the wedding sheets be her shroud) and in her mysterious request to Emilia, ". . . tonight / Lay on my bed my wedding sheets" (IV, ii, 106-107), as if knowing, and faithful to, Othello's private dream of her, herself preparing the scene of her death as Othello, utilizing Iago's stage directions, imagines it must happen ("Do it not with poison, strangle her in her bed, even the bed she hath contaminated." "Good, good. The justice of it pleases. Very good" [IV, i, 219-223]); as if knowing that only with these sheets on their bed can his dream of her be contested. The dream is of contamination. The fact the dream works upon is the act of deflowering. Othello is reasonably literal about this, as reasonable as a man in a trance can be:

. . . When I have plucked the rose,
I cannot give it vital growth again,
It must needs wither. I'll smell it on the tree.
Ah, balmy breath, that dost almost persuade
Justice to break her sword! One more, one more.
Be thus when thou art dead, and I will kill thee,
And love thee after. . . .

(V, ii, 13-19)

(Necrophilia is an apt fate for a mind whose reason is suffocating in its sumptuous capacity for figuration, and which takes the dying into love literally to entail killing. "That death's unnatural that kills for loving" [V, ii, 42]; or that turns its object to live stone. It is apt as well that Desdemona sense death, or the figure of death, as the impending cause of death. And at the very end, facing himself, he will not recover from this. "I kissed thee ere I killed thee." And after too. And not just now when you died from me, but on our previous nights as well.)

The exhibition of wedding sheets in this romantic, superstitious, conventional environment, can only refer to the practice of proving purity by staining. I mention in passing that this provides a satisfactory weight for the importance Othello attaches to his charmed (or farcical) handkerchief, the fact that it is spotted, spotted with strawberries.

Well, were the sheets stained or not? Was she a virgin or not? The answers seem as ambiguous as to our earlier question whether they are fast married. Is the final, fatal reenactment of their wedding night a clear denial of what really happened, so that we can just read off, by negation, what really happened? Or is it a straight reenactment, without negation, and the flower was still on the tree, as far as he knew? In that case, who was reluctant to see it plucked, he or she? On such issues, farce and tragedy are separated by the thickness of a membrane.

We of course have no answer to such questions. But what matters is that Othello has no answer; or rather he can give none, for any answer to the question, granted that I am right in taking the question to be his, is intolerable. The torture of logic in his mind we might represent as follows: Either I shed her

blood and scarred her or I did not. If I did not then she was not a virgin and this is a stain upon me. If I did then she is no longer a virgin and this is a stain upon me. Either way I am contaminated. (I do not say that the sides of this dilemma are of equal significance for Othello.)

But this much logic anyone but a lunkhead might have mastered apart from actually marrying. (He himself may say as much when he asks himself, too late, why he married.) Then what quickens this logic for him? Call whatever it is Iago. What is Iago?

He is everything, we know, Othello is not. Critical and witty, for example, where Othello is commanding and eloquent; retentive where the other is lavish; concealed where the other is open; cynical where the other is romantic; conventional where the other is original; imagines flesh where the other imagines spirit; the imaginer and manager of the human guise; the bottom end of the world. And so on. A Christian has to call him devil. The single fact between Othello and Iago I focus on here is that Othello fails twice at the end to kill Iago, knowing he cannot kill him. This all but all-powerful chieftain is stopped at this nobody. It is the point of his impotence, and the meaning of it. Iago is everything Othello must deny, and which, denied, is not killed but works on, like poison, like furies.

In speaking of the point and meaning of Othello's impotence, I do not think of Othello as having been in an everyday sense impotent with Desdemona. I think of him, rather, as having been surprised by her, at what he has elicited from her; at, so to speak, a success rather than a failure. It is the dimension of her that shows itself in that difficult and dirty banter between her and Iago as they await Othello on Cyprus. Rather than imagine himself to have elicited that, or solicited it, Othello would imagine it elicited by anyone and everyone else. Surprised, let me say, to find that she is flesh and blood. It was the one thing he could not imagine for himself. For if she is flesh and blood then, since they are one, so is he. But then although his potency of imagination can command the imagination of this child who is everything he is not, so that she sees his visage in his mind, she also sees that he is not identical with his mind, he is more than his imagination, black with desire, which she desires. Iago knows it, and Othello cannot bear what Iago knows, so he cannot outface the way in which he knows it, or knows anything. He cannot forgive her for existing, for being separate from him, outside, beyond command, commanding, her captain's captain.

It is an unstable frame of mind which compounds figurative with literal dying in love; and Othello unstably projects upon her, as he blames her:

O perjured woman! Thou dost stone thy heart,
And makest me call what I intend to do
A murder, which I thought a sacrifice.

(V, ii, 63-65)

As he is the one who gives out lies about her, so he is the one who will give her a stone heart for her stone body, as if in his words of stone which confound the figurative and the literal there is the confounding of the incantations of poetry and of magic. He makes of her the thing he feels (" . . . my heart is turned to stone" [IV, i, 193]), but covers the ugliness of his thought with the beauty of his

imagery—a debasement of himself and of his art of words. But what produces the idea of sacrifice? How did he manage the thought of her death as a sacrifice? To what was he to sacrifice her? To his image of himself and of her, to keep his image intact, uncontaminated; as if *this* were his protection from slander's image of him, say from a conventional view of his blackness. So he becomes conventional, sacrificing love to convention. But this was unstable; it could not be said. Yet better thought than the truth, which was that the central sacrifice of romance has already been made by them: her virginity, her intactness, her perfection, had been gladly foregone by her for him, for the sake of their union, for the seaming of it. It is the sacrifice he could not accept, for then he was not himself perfect. It must be displaced. The scar is the mark of finitude, of separateness; it must be borne whatever one's anatomical condition, or color. It is the sin or the sign of refusing imperfection that produces, or justifies, the visions and torments of devils that inhabit the region of this play.

If such a man as Othello is rendered impotent and murderous by aroused, or by having aroused, female sexuality; or let us say: if this man is horrified by human sexuality, in himself and in others; then no human being is free of this possibility. What I have wished to bring out is the nature of this possibility, or the possibility of this nature, the way human sexuality is the field in which the fantasy of finitude, of its acceptance and its repetitious overcoming, is worked out; the way human separateness is turned equally toward splendor and toward horror, mixing beauty and ugliness; turned toward before and after; toward flesh and blood. In "Knowing and Acknowledging" I take the skeptical wish as one of interpreting "a metaphysical finitude as an intellectual lack." Is this a denial of the human or an expression of it? For of course there are those for whom the denial of the human *is* the human. Call this the Christian view. It would be why Nietzsche undertook to identify the task of overcoming the human with the task of overcoming the denial of the human; which implies overcoming the human not through mortification but through joy, say ecstasy. If the former can be thought of as the denial of the body then the latter may be thought of as the affirmation of the body. Then those who are pushed, in attempting to counter a dualistic view of mind and body, to assert the identity of body and mind, are skipping or converting the problem. For suppose my identity with my body is something that exists only in my affirmation of my body. Then the question is: What would the body *become* under affirmation? And what would become of *me*?

I conclude with two thoughts, or perspectives, from which to survey one's space of conviction in the reading I have started of *Othello*, and from which perhaps to guide it further.

First, what you might call the philosophy or the moral of the play seems all but contained in the essay Montaigne entitles "On some verses of Virgil," in such a remark as: "What a monstrous animal to be a horror to himself, to be burdened by his pleasures, to regard himself as a misfortune!" The essay concerns the compatibility of sex with marriage, of sex with age; it remarks upon, and upon the relations among, jealousy, chastity, imagination, doubts about virginity; upon the strength of language and the honesty of language; and includes mention of a Turk and of certain instances of necrophilia. One just about runs through the topics of *Othello* if to this essay one adds the essay "Of the

power of imagination,” which contains a Moor and speaks of a king of Egypt who, finding himself impotent with his bride, threatened to kill her, thinking it was some sort of sorcery. The moral would be what might have been contained in Othello’s “. . . one that lov’d not wisely, but too well,” that all these topics should be food for thought and moderation, not for torture and murder; as fit for rue and laughter as for pity and terror; that they are not tragic unless one makes them so, takes them so; that we are tragic in what we take to be tragic; that one must take one’s imperfections with a “gay and sociable wisdom” (as in Montaigne’s “Of experience”) not with a somber and isolating eloquence. It is advice to accept one’s humanity, and one can almost see Iago as the slanderer of human nature (this would be his diabolism) braced with Othello as the enacter of the slander—the one thinking to escape human nature from below, the other from above. But to whom is the advice usable? And how do we understand why it cannot be taken by those in directest need of it? The urging of moderation is valuable only to the extent that it results from a knowledge of the human possibilities beyond its urging. Is Montaigne’s attitude fully earned, itself without a tint of the wish for exemption from the human? Or is Shakespeare’s topic of the sheets and the handkerchief understandable as a rebuke to Montaigne, for refusing a further nook of honesty? A bizarre question, I suppose; but meant only to indicate how one might, and why one should, test whether my emphasis on the stain is necessary to give sufficient weight to one’s experience of the horror and the darkness of these words and actions, or whether it is imposed.

My second concluding thought is more purely speculative, and arises in response to my having spoken just now of “the refusal of imperfection” as producing “the visions and torments of devils that inhabit the region of this play.” I do not wish to dispute the evidence marshalled by Bernard Spivack in his *Shakespeare and the Allegory of Evil* showing Iago to be a descendent of the late morality figure of the Vice. I mean rather to help explain further the appearance of that figure in this particular play, and, I guess, to suggest its humanizing, or human splittling off (the sort of interpretation Spivack’s book seems to deplore). It is against the tradition of the morality play that I now go on to call attention—I cannot think I am the first to say it out loud—to the hell and the demon staring out of the names of Othello and Desdemona. I mention this curiosity to prepare something meant as a nearly pure conjecture, wishing others to prove it one way or another, namely that underlying and shaping the events of this play are certain events of witch trials. Phrases such as “the ocular proof” and “. . . cords, or knives / Poison, or fire, or suffocating streams . . .” (III, iii, 388–389) seem to me to call for location in a setting of legal torture. And I confess to finding myself thinking of Desdemona’s haunting characterization of a certain conception of her as “a moth of peace” when I read, from an 1834 study called *Folk-lore of the NE of Scotland*, “In some parts of Scotland moths are called ‘witches’ ” (quoted in Kittredge, *Witchcraft in Old and New England*). But what prompts my thought primarily is the crazed logic Othello’s rage for proof and for “satisfaction” seems to require (like testing for a woman’s witchcraft by seeing whether she will drown, declaring that if she does she was innocent but if she does not she is to be put to death for a witch): What happened on our wedding night is that I killed her; but she is not dead; therefore she is not human; therefore she must die. (“Yet she must die, else she’ll betray more men” [V, ii, 6].) Again he claims

not to be acting personally, but by authority; here he has delivered a sentence. I recall that the biblical justification for the trial of witches was familiarly from the punishments in Exodus: "Thou shalt not suffer a witch to live." Othello seems to be babbling the crazed logic as he falls into his explicit faint or trance: "First to be hanged, and then to confess. I tremble at it" (IV, i, 38-39), not knowing whether he is torturer or victim.

I introduced the idea of the trial for witchcraft as a conjecture, meaning immediately that it is not meant as a hypothesis: I do not *require* it for any interpretative alignment of my senses with the world of this play. It is enough, without supposing Shakespeare to have cribbed from literal subtexts of this sort, that the play opens with a public accusation of witchcraft, and an abbreviated trial, and is then succeeded with punctuating thoughts of hell and by fatal scenes of psychological torture, and concludes with death as the proof of mortality, that is, of innocence (cf., "If that thou be'st a devil, I cannot kill thee" [V, ii, 287]). Enough, I mean, to stir the same depths of superstition—of a horror that proposes our lack of certain access to other minds—that under opportune institutions caused trials of witchcraft. The play is at once, as we would expect of what we call Shakespeare's humanity, an examination of the madness and bewitchment of inquisitors, as well as of the tortures of love; of those tortures of which both victim and torturer are victims.

A statue, a stone, is something whose existence is fundamentally open to the ocular proof. A human being is not. The two bodies lying together on their bridal and death sheets form an emblem of this fact, the truth of skepticism. What this man lacked was not certainty. He knew everything, but he could not yield to what he knew, be commanded by it. He found out too much for his mind, not too little. Their differences from one another—the one everything the other is not—form an emblem of human separation, which can be accepted, and granted, or not. Like the dissociation from God; everything we are not.

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¹Quotations from *Othello* are taken from *Complete Works of William Shakespeare* by G. B. Harrison (Harcourt Brace, New York: 1952).

²I am grateful to Stephen Graubard and to Judith Shklar for comments that helped me to improve the letter to Alceste.

³From *The Claim of Reason: Wittgenstein, Skepticism, Morality, and Tragedy*, by Stanley Cavell. Copyright © 1979 by Oxford University Press, Inc. Quoted by permission of the publisher. An abbreviated version of this material was presented at the annual meeting of the Modern Language Association in December 1978.