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THE TIME OF TRAGEDY:

CAVELL, AGAMBEN, AND THE ETHICS OF THE CONTEMPORARY

- ‘And what is wrong with strutting and fretting for an “hour on the stage” that is not wrong with time altogether?’ (Stanley Cavell, ‘Macbeth Appalled’)

I

Allow me to begin this article by asking the reader to visualize a brief yet disturbing scene. Assuming that you are sitting down whilst reading this, I ask you to imagine, if you will, that about a dozen paces from your seat, you see a young couple – an attractive young woman and a well-built young man. They appear to be in love, they are tender enough with one another, and are engaged in light conversation. Then, all of a sudden – and it is very sudden – the man pins the woman down on the bed and starts throttling her. She struggles. She writhes. She tries to scream. They are only a dozen paces from where you are sitting, and you – do nothing. You do not rush to help her, though you could do so in a matter of seconds. You do not call out for help, nor do you look round to see if there are others who could assist, nor do you take and your phone and call the police. She gasps in vain for one last breath, and as the life drains out of her body, you have one final chance to get up and save her. A moment later, the young woman lies lifeless, and you have not even stirred in your seat.

Presented with such a scenario, I venture the following predictions:

- 1) That most readers would agree that doing nothing in the face of such events would be morally or ethically reprehensible behaviour.
- 2) That at least some readers would agree that, if we could prove there was a good and valid reason why we were genuinely unable to help the young woman in question, then we would be at least partially exonerated or exculpated from our otherwise deplorable inaction.
- 3) That almost all readers would agree that a good and valid reason of this kind would be that the seat we are sitting on is in a theatre; that the young couple before us are on the stage; that the young man is an actor playing Othello, and the young woman is an actress playing Desdemona.

If I am right in making these predictions, then surely the most intriguing aspect of Stanley Cavell's lifelong and multifaceted philosophical engagements with the question of tragedy is that for him, being in a theatre constitutes no reason whatsoever to release us from our ethical obligations towards the people before us.

The purpose of this paper is not to outline how and why the many common-sense objections we might raise to this – for instance, calling the characters 'fictional', their

actions ‘pretending’ or ‘play-acting’, the space of the theatre an ‘aesthetic context’, and so on – turn out to be philosophically incoherent, and hence, in Cavell’s view, no excuse at all. My aim in beginning with this scene is rather to start by drawing attention as vividly as possible to the strange fact that tragedy – a genre held since ancient Greece to have an ethical or moral mission to its audience – is nevertheless commonly regarded by the people who presumably constitute these audiences as rendering them incapable of ethical or moral action in the face of the tragic. Why is this?

In a tragedy, as Cavell points out, there is a stark asymmetry: ‘pain and death [are] in our presence when we [are] not in theirs’.¹ In any other situation which involves terrible pain and death, the fact that ‘there is nothing we can do’ would normally exculpate us morally and ethically from inactivity. But tragedy makes ethical and moral claims on us nonetheless, in spite of – and perhaps even *because* of – our complete helplessness in its world of pain and death: as Cavell says, ‘There is nothing and we know there is nothing we can do. Tragedy is meant to make sense of that condition’ (*MWM*, 330). To put it another way, it is a strange fact of the tragic that whilst there is nothing that we can do or could do to intervene, we may nevertheless feel that there is something that we *should* do. This points towards the moral and ethical dimensions of tragic drama.²

Cavell alludes to an old joke about a yokel from the South who rushes on stage at a performance of *Othello* to save the white woman from the black man, and he suggests that, joking apart, the rest of the audience’s leaving her to her fate is an equally odd form

of behaviour.³ If we consider that the audience members (presumably) *enjoy* watching Desdemona being murdered, that they have chosen and even paid to do so, and that they might well praise the murder scene afterwards, then it isn't hard to see that the spectator at a tragedy takes up a morally questionable position. To ask a similar question to Voltaire's, how is it that witnessing Othello's loss of reason and Desdemona's death could bring us *pleasure*? And, to complicate matters further, why is it that certain kinds of pleasure – say, voyeurism, *Schadenfreude*, or just the relief that all this mayhem is happening to some other poor sucker instead of me – would strike us as deeply *unethical*? This must surely mean that there is a kind of pleasure we can take from being spectators of tragic events that is, in spite of everything, ethically sound.

The trouble with the pleasures of voyeurism, *Schadenfreude* and so forth is that they are 'irresponsible', in the sense that they do not recognise that taking pleasure in the events of a tragedy means we become implicated ethically in those events. This in turn means that we must take responsibility for what is happening before us: 'we are implicated in the failures we are witnessing, we share the responsibility for tragedy' (*MWM*, 282). This is not to claim that Othello's mad jealousy is somehow 'my fault', but it is to claim that since I watched his mad jealousy unfold, even enjoyed watching it unfold, and yet did nothing (and, importantly, *could* do nothing) to stop it, I am answerable for having taken up, or put myself in, such a morally uncomfortable position. Being part of a tragic audience means I am to acknowledge this condition, and acknowledge that it is up to me to do so: 'A performance is nothing without our participation in an audience; and this participation is up to each of us'.⁴ That is what is

meant by taking responsibility for the tragic: it involves the necessity of taking an ethical and moral stance in my behaviour towards others.

As Cavell has it, watching characters on stage in a tragedy is a particularly revealing example of the phenomenon he calls acknowledgement, because for tragedy to be tragedy, it requires a strong identification with its characters, which means ‘not simply that we are seeing and hearing them, but that we are acknowledging them (or specifically failing to)’ (*MWM*, 332). And if we withhold our acknowledgement, then ‘Tragedy shows us that we are responsible for the death of others even when we have not murdered them, and even when we have not manslaughtered them innocently’ (*MWM*, 332). A pattern of thought unfolds here that in some respects bears close resemblances to Levinas’s notion of the appeal of the face, calling me to my responsibility for the Other with its message ‘Thou shalt not kill’.⁵ Because ‘the first task of the dramatist is to gather us and then to silence and immobilize us’ (*MWM*, 326), to be an audience member in a theater is to adopt a near-Levinasian position of passivity in the face of the Other. This passivity arises from the absolute gulf that lies between me in my seat and Othello on the stage, and from the impossibility of ever bridging that gap. I am therefore obliged, firstly, to recognize or *acknowledge* the separateness of the characters on the stage from me in my seat. This acknowledgment brings with it not a reciprocity, but instead a moment of *self*-acknowledgment which Michael Fischer explains thus: ‘I cannot acknowledge their separateness without accepting my own; I cannot coherently declare that they are there without revealing that I am here.’⁶ But this creates a problem. It is one thing to say, as Cavell does, that ‘If one is to acknowledge another as one’s neighbor, one must

acknowledge oneself as his or her neighbor',⁷ but quite another to practice this acknowledgement in a theater, where I cannot make myself Othello's neighbour, even though he is physically close enough and has an ethical claim on me that a neighbour might. As Stephen Mulhall explains:

This suggests a complex relationship between acknowledgement inside and outside the theatre. In a theatre, it is not possible for us to go up to the people who require acknowledgement from us; we can neither declare our presence to them nor hide it, as we must outside the theatre. We might express this difference by saying that, in the theatre, our hiddenness, silence, and isolation are enforced – they are its conditions. But then these conditions can be thought of as literalizing the conditions we enact and exact outside the theatre, the conditions that we so often enforce on ourselves and upon others; so that a failure of acknowledgement outside the theatre can be thought of as a theatricalization of others – leaving ourselves in darkness, converting them into characters on a stage, fictionalizing their existence.⁸

To this we could usefully add a few words from Espen Hammer's recent book on Cavell: 'as such, theater may help us, as human beings or as citizens, to stop choosing silence and hiddenness, that is, to see that theatricality must be defeated. ... Hence Cavell's ontology of Shakespearean theater might be regarded as an early version of his theory of redemptive reading.'⁹

To summarise, according to Cavell, 'tragedy is the public form of the life of skepticism with respect to other minds' (*CoR*, 478), because it dramatizes the possibility

of skepticism as a possibility that can befall each and every one of us.¹⁰ To the extent of that possibility, a tragic hero is acting out *our* plight as well as his own. And this is where and how Cavell's literary reflections on the nature and structure of tragedy join hands with his concerns in moral philosophy and ethics. The connection between them is rooted in the same question that is raised by trying to rescue Desdemona, so that asking 'What is the mechanism of our identification with a character?' (*MWM*, 334) becomes a way of exploring how we identify with our fellow human beings both inside and outside the theater, and how this encounter with others is at root a moral or an ethical moment. Tragedy can indeed 'make us practical, capable of acting' in an ethical way, but only 'by showing us the natural limitations of acting' (*MWM*, 347). These limitations are precisely what are shown in the skepticism and avoidance that tragedy exhibits, both in the characters on stage, and in the audience seated in the theatre: 'it is the nature of this tragedy that its actors have to confirm their separateness alone, through isolation, the denial of others. What is purged is my difference from others, in everything but separateness' (*MWM*, 338). My separateness and isolation are precisely the limitations on the choices I am free to make. In summary, then, to be a member of an audience of tragedy is to be placed in a position that is stranded between the skeptical and the ethical.

II

It would not be too ungenerous, I hope, to suggest that Cavell's intricate writings on tragedy are sometimes apt to confuse, because he moves from questions of ontology (i.e., what kind of being is a character in a tragedy?; what kind of existence do characters

on a stage have?; why can't we rescue Desdemona?) to questions of epistemology (i.e., what is the role of knowledge and its avoidance in tragedy?; how and why do its characters succumb to skepticism?; what are the implications of these questions for the audience?) to questions of ethics (i.e., why is it felt to be a problem that tragedy condemns me to do nothing in the face of the other's suffering?; what can tragedy teach me about acknowledging the other?; what is the ethical import of tragedy?). I hope to demonstrate in this section how the ontological, epistemological, and ethical aspects of tragedy all meet and intertwine in one crucial yet underappreciated facet of Cavell's writings on the tragic: the role of time in Cavell's account of tragedy, I will argue, is so central to it that a correct understanding of that account and its manifold implications cannot be grasped without investigating the temporality – or, better, temporalities – of tragedy.

What is the time of tragedy? Firstly, it is the closest Cavell comes to establishing a foundation for 'the mechanism of our identification with a character' (*MWM*, 334). Summarizing why it is that any attempt on our part to rescue Desdemona is inherently futile, Cavell says: 'We know we cannot approach [Othello and Desdemona] ... because ... they and we do not occupy the same space; there is no path from my location to his. ... We do, however, occupy the same *time*' (*MWM*, 334 – emphasis added). Time therefore underpins the audience's experience of tragedy, and Cavell goes on to claim that it underpins the very nature of tragedy itself. He says:

And the time is always now; time is measured solely by what is now happening to [the characters on stage], for what they are doing now is all that

is happening. The time is of course not necessarily *the* present – that is up to the playwright. But the time presented, whether the present or the past, is this moment, at which an arrival is awaited, in which a decision is made or left unmade, at which the past erupts into the present, in which reason or emotion fail. ... The novel also comprises these moments, but only as having happened (*MWM*, 334)

And so tragedy, unlike narrative fiction, presents us with things that are happening *right now*, before our eyes. Tragedy is *immediate* – both in the sense that it happens in this instant and in the sense that this instant is right before our eyes, and not diverted away from us through some other medium like print or film – it is this property that imparts the sense of urgency to tragedy's ethical claims. It is also this same property that gives it a sense of ontological tangibility, of the 'here and now' – not that the action and the characters in it are unproblematically 'here' (they are separated from us by being on stage), but they nevertheless have their existence 'now'. The temporality of the present is therefore fundamental to tragedy itself, and also to our experience of it. As Cavell explains:

The perception or attitude demanded in following this drama is one which demands a continuous attention to what is happening at each here and now, as if everything of significance is happening at this moment, while each thing that happens turns a leaf of time. I think of it as an experience of *continuous presentness*. (*MWM*, 322)

Without this temporality of the continuous present, we are not in the presence of a tragedy. But that is not (merely) because it is an inherent property of the tragic: rather, it

is as much up to us, the audience, to enter into this present as it is up to the tragic to impress it upon us. The audience must participate in it, and, in order to be able to do so, they must first *acknowledge* that this tragedy they are watching is present to them.

Time, therefore, also plays a central part in demarcating the crucial watershed between acknowledgment and skepticism that is negotiated in a theater, specifically between the audience and the characters on stage acting out their tragedy before us. Cavell suggests that one synonym for the question ‘what expresses acknowledgment in a theater?’ would be ‘what counts as putting ourselves in a character’s presence?’ (*MWM*, 334). Part of the anguish of helplessness felt by the audience of a tragedy comes from the fact that, as observed earlier, ‘pain and death [are] in our presence when we [are] not in theirs’ (*MWM*, 346). But Cavell argues that time offers us a way – indeed, the only way – of acknowledging the claims of the other even when there is no possibility of being physically present to them:

We are not in, and cannot put ourselves in, the presence of the characters; but we are in, or can put ourselves in, their *present*. It is in making their present ours, their moments as they occur, that we complete our acknowledgment of them. But this requires making their present *theirs*. (*MWM*, 337)

One of the main roles that time therefore plays in the Cavellian account of tragedy, then, is that it helps explain how the claim of the other upon me – the claim of Lear, of Othello, of Hamlet and their ilk – is binding upon me even though we cannot acknowledge each other in any traditional sense. As Cavell has it, ‘what is revealed is my separateness from what is happening to them; that I am I, and here. It is only in this perception of them as

separate from me that I make them *present*' (*MWM*, 338 – emphasis added). I take this to mean that time – specifically, entering into tragedy's temporality of the 'continuous present' – is the only bridge that can cross the ontological gulf that otherwise separates what happens on stage from the rest of the auditorium, or from the outside world. But it does so not by establishing some kind of higher unity into which the audience members can enter that somehow makes them 'as one with' the characters and actions of the tragedy, and thereby empathize with them in some mystical or metaphysical way – rather, it establishes the basis for both ethics and acknowledgment because it does the very opposite: it enables us to 'make them *other*, and face them' (*MWM*, 338).

It is here that the tragic temporality of the continuous present brings together the epistemological question of acknowledging the other with the ethical claim of the other that, for tragedy to be tragic, accompanies it. Relatedly, this temporality can also explain why it is that, in the instant in which Desdemona is about to be strangled or Duncan stabbed or Cordelia disowned, I sit still and quiet and do nothing. 'It is not that my time is different from theirs but that I have no present apart from theirs. The time in which that hint is laid, in which that knowledge is fixed, in which those fingers grip that throat, is all the time I have. There is no time in which to stop it' (*MWM*, 338). Sharing a temporality of continuous presentness with the characters of a tragedy means that what is happening to them right now is also happening before me right now, and yet that same temporality also means that all I can do right now is acknowledge what is happening. 'The present in which action is alone possible is fully occupied' by my acknowledgement of the other, which means that from the audience member's perspective, 'Everything which can be

done is being done' (*MWM*, 338). And so, in the closest Cavell comes to explaining why we cannot rescue Desdemona, he says:

Now I can give one answer to the question: Why do I do nothing, faced with tragic events? If I do nothing because I am distracted by the pleasures of witnessing this folly, or out of my knowledge of the proprieties of the place I am in, or because I think there will be some more appropriate time in which to act, or because I feel helpless to un-do events of such proportion, then I continue my sponsorship of evil in the world, its sway waiting upon these forms of inaction. I exit running. But if I do nothing because there is nothing to do, where that means that I have given over the time and the space in which action is mine and consequently that I am in awe before the fact that I cannot do and suffer what it is another's to do and suffer, then I confirm the final fact of our separateness. And that is the unity of our condition. (*MWM*, 339)

What all this suggests is that the temporality of tragedy – its time of the continuous present – is a crucial feature of it that binds together our ontological understanding of the tragic (i.e., the kind of existence its characters and their actions have is one that involves a special form of temporality); our epistemological relation to it (i.e., acknowledging these characters and avoiding the skepticism to which they fall prey involves first and foremost understanding and entering into this temporality); and the ethical claims of tragedy. But the time of tragedy, this temporality of continuous presentness, does not reveal to its audience members any positivistic message of what *should be done* in the name of ethics – in fact, quite the opposite:

Then what is revealed? ... what I share with everyone else present with me at what is happening: that I am hidden and silent and fixed. In a word, that there is a point at which I am helpless before the acting and the suffering of others. But I know the true point of my helplessness only if I have acknowledged totally the fact and the true cause of their suffering. Otherwise I am not emptied of help, but withholding of it. Tragedy arises from the confusion of these states. (*MWM*, 338-9)

The time of tragedy, then, is what puts us in the near-Levinasian position of passivity in the face of the other. It creates the condition of possibility for the kind of acknowledgment of the other that constitutes the ethical dimension of tragedy itself.

Perhaps the most commonsensical objection to the role I have sketched for temporality in tragedy arises from the way Cavell describes the 'experience of *continuous presentness*' by saying: 'Not that anything is possible (though it is) but that we do not know what is, and is not, next' (*MWM*, 322). Now, this is likely to be palpably untrue for many members of Hamlet's, Othello's, and Macbeth's audiences, who are likely to know in advance *exactly* what is next, what scene will follow the present one, and where the denouement is headed – either because the tragedy's plot is familiar to them, or because it is predictable. Surely a key problem with describing tragedies as rooted in a 'continuous present' is that so many of them are just as rooted in something that happened in the past, before the curtain was even raised (one thinks of Oedipus slaying his father at the crossroads, or of Claudius murdering Hamlet's father), or else are orientated towards the future in their inexorable build-up to the denouement (one thinks of Othello's implacable

descent to murderous jealousy, or Hamlet's procrastination leading his revenge awry), or, as Hamlet's example demonstrates, orientated in both directions at once. How, then, can it make sense to locate the basis of tragedy in a temporality that consists solely in an ongoing present? Stephen Mulhall explains things thus:

the characters in the play live through a sequence of moments each of which constitutes the present for them, and if the audience is genuinely to confront those characters, it must confront each presented moment of the play's events as the present moment of its characters. If, for example, I import my knowledge of the play's ending into my judgement of a character's motives at its outset; or if I regard events already presented as determining present and future events so that I completely expunge the character's freedom to have chosen differently at each moment of decision and action ... then I fail to acknowledge her and her fellows as particular individuals located but not locked in time and space; I fail to acknowledge them as people.¹¹

Viewing a tragedy by stepping outside of the perpetually unfolding present – whether by viewing it as the atemporal 'verbal icon' of the New Critics or as some pre-scripted, pre-destined sequence of cause and effect ordained by the fates – is simultaneously to change the ontological status of the characters in it, our epistemological apprehension of them, and our ethical relation to them, in that we are avoiding their plight as the plight of a fellow human being.

Such an avoidance is all too common in traditional writings on tragedy, and perhaps regrettably common amongst theater-goers as well. Wittgenstein paraphrases a

typical view common to critics, students, and audience members who find themselves moved by a tragedy: ‘Every tragedy could really start with the words: “Nothing would have happened had it not been that...”’¹² There is some deep-seated human need to understand how things could have come to such a tragic end. But the mistake that we make here is to assume that we could understand things by *explaining* them, by tracing and re-tracing their origins and outcomes – in short, to view tragedy in terms of its past and its (eventual) future.¹³ Such a view, for Cavell,¹⁴ contains a grain of truth, but only a grain:

Many critics seem to know quite well what is good for Lear and what he ought not to have done. ... Here the well-known experience of *inevitability* in a tragic sequence comes to attention. But to what shall we attribute it? It [is] not wrong to read the sense of inevitability in terms of a chain of cause and effect; what [is] wrong ... [is] to read this chain as if its first link lay in the past, and hence as if the present were the scene of its ineluctable effects, in the face of which we must learn suffering (*MWM*, 317-8).

This is problematic because each present moment of tragedy as it becomes present (to the characters and the audience) contains within it the possibility of an end to the skepticism and the avoidance of the other that could halt the tragedy in its tracks. Not that this possibility will strike us as a very live possibility for Macbeth, Hamlet, Lear, or Othello (and least of all for Coriolanus) – ‘if one is assured they could’ put a stop to their avoidances, Cavell writes, ‘one is forgetting who these characters are’ (*MWM*, 341). But the ethical power of tragedy resides in the fact that acknowledging the plight of the other remains a live possibility for us, in the audience, whom these characters ignore. This

possibility is removed from us the moment we succumb to the temptation to explain tragedy away by enshrining past origins (as causes) and inevitable outcomes (as effects) in what is a very different form of tragic temporality. The temporality of past cause and eventual effect removes from us the possibility of making the plight of the characters present to us – we can no longer *acknowledge* them aright. Ontologically, they become mere products of their histories; epistemologically, they become puppets rather than people; ethically, their claims are pre-scripted, and no longer the claims of a genuine ‘other’.

And so, whilst there is, as I mentioned earlier, a grain of truth in statements like: ‘At the beginning there is no reason why things have come to this pass, nothing an exposition could clarify. It is a crossroads, they are there’ (*MWM*, 342), Cavell is nonetheless right to warn us that ‘there is danger in the truth that everything which happens is “contained” in these openings’ (*MWM*, 342). The danger is that in containing the tragic within a dead, mechanical temporality of past causes and eventual outcomes, we underestimate the threat of skepticism as a live, human possibility. The grain of truth, as I see it, is that such a temporality does indeed exist as a possibility for each and every audience member.¹⁵ So this temporality provides all of us with a temptation from within tragedy itself: a temptation, perhaps *the* temptation, towards skepticism and avoidance of the claims of tragedy as tragedy. But I want to argue that this temptation is also something of an opportunity. The mechanical temporality that sees tragedy as deriving from causes in the past leading eventually to an inevitable outcome gives us, alongside its temptation to skepticism and avoidance, a chance to see this very kind of temporality as

something from which we can reclaim – even, perhaps, liberate – our understanding of time itself. Tragedy, thought of this way, can give us the vision to redeem time, both the time of the tragedy and *our* time, by bringing it out of a mechanical past and into a free present: ‘We have, as tragic figures do, to go back to beginnings, either to un-do or to be undone, or to do again the thing which has caused tragedy, as though at some point in the past history is stuck, and time marks time there waiting to be released’ (*MWM*, 349).

That, at any rate, is how I understand Cavell’s assigning a crucial role to the temporality of the present in the power of tragedy to move us and to speak to us. Reframing the classic Aristotelian account of catharsis, he claims: ‘Catharsis, if that is the question, is a matter of purging attachment from everything but the present, from pity for the past and terror of the future’ (*MWM*, 338). And if I am right about this reframing, then unlike traditional Aristotelian catharsis, which seeks to demonstrate what tragedy can do for me, Cavell’s version of catharsis seeks also to suggest what I can do for tragedy.¹⁶

III

Perhaps one response to the above argument would be to ask, as the great Miles Davis put it, ‘So What?’ Surely, after all, philosophers have known since at least the *Confessions* of St Augustine that there is no aspect of time more elusive or thorny than the present moment; since Heidegger’s descriptions of *Dasein* that the present, and presence itself, involves an experience of incompleteness; and, since Derrida’s critique of

the metaphysics of presence, that all this is a very good thing too. True as it may be that what Cavell means by ‘the present’ is not quite what Derrida means by ‘presence’, neither is it an entirely different thing altogether.¹⁷ Nor is Cavell’s temporality of tragedy likely to appear any more satisfactory to traditionalists. Notwithstanding his disclaimer that ‘my object here is not a theory of tragedy’ (*MWM*, 320), the experience of time Cavell diagnoses as fundamental to the genre seems at odds with the traditional cliché that Shakespeare’s tragedies are ‘timeless’. Surely tragedy would not have the ability to speak to our lives, to our futurity, and our culture – in short, it would not be seen as *tragic* – if the present were its only form of temporality. Tragedy would not be able to convey any of its powerful sense of the redemptive, nor would it retain its cathartic ability to move us once we have left the theatre, nor, most importantly, would it exert an ethical power to direct our actions and sympathies throughout our lives if it were not able to address itself in some way to a futurity beyond the now.

A rather stronger articulation of this kind of future-orientated tragic temporality is to be found in the early Nietzsche. To paraphrase (roughly) the position of *Untimely Meditations*, tragedy, like art itself, is neither on time nor in time. It is against time, in favour of times to come. Since Cavell reveals himself to be an astute reader of Nietzsche’s *The Birth of Tragedy*, there is no need to conduct a survey of relationships between Nietzschean and Cavellian views on the subject of tragedy. But it is worth drawing attention to some of Nietzsche’s comments in *Untimely Meditations* that ascribe a power to tragedy which is not merely redemptive, but that sounds almost messianic. He claims ‘There is only one hope and one guarantee for the future of humanity: it consists

in his *retention of the sense for the tragic*. He further claims that tragedy makes us ‘free of the terrible anxiety which death and time evoke’.¹⁸ Here we find a concise declaration of tragedy’s orientation towards futurity, its redemptive properties in the face of death, and its ability to liberate us from time itself – all messianic properties. This would seem to fly in the face of the Cavellian emphasis on tragedy’s power as rooted in a ‘continuous present’. But I owe to Giorgio Agamben’s recent essay ‘What is the Contemporary?’ an insight that provides a way out of this impasse, and that is his observation that ‘contemporariness par excellence’ is to be found in St Paul’s description of messianic time as *ho nyn kairos* – ‘the time of the now’.¹⁹ Indeed, it is precisely this conception of messianic time as ‘the time of the now’ that lies at the heart of what Agamben calls ‘the contemporary’. At the start of his essay, Agamben invokes Nietzsche by approvingly citing a remark of Roland Barthes’s that ‘the contemporary is the untimely’ (‘WITC’, 40).²⁰ He further notes that Nietzsche turned to philosophizing untimeliness immediately after his writings on tragedy, and Cavell makes the very same connection: ‘doubtless his work on tragedy went into it’.²¹ If, as I am about to argue, there is a potentially fruitful relationship between the ‘contemporary’ temporality of Agamben’s messianic time and the ‘continuous present’ of Cavell’s tragic temporality, then a good starting point from which to explore it would be the observation that all seven of Cavell’s readings of Shakespeare’s tragedies hinge on ways in which the present is avoided, forgone, forfeited, etc., leading him to suggest that ‘the loss of presentness ... seems to be the message ... of Shakespeare’s tragedies themselves’ (*MWM*, 322-3). Agamben’s messianic view of the contemporary might help address this loss in that for him, ‘the

messianic now ... is not the chronological end of time, but the present as the exigency of fulfillment' (*TTR*, 76).

According to Agamben, 'the widespread view of messianic time as oriented solely toward the future is fallacious' (*TTR*, 77), and is responsible for a pervasive confusion between messianic time and the more straightforwardly future-orientated temporalities of the apocalyptic, the eschatological, and the prophetic conceptions of time. And yet, whilst the messianic *kairos* is best understood as the Pauline 'time of the now', it nevertheless retains a vestigial or gestural relationship with the future – an aporetic temporality which Agamben describes in terms of a 'paradoxical tension between an *already* and a *not yet*' (*TTR*, 69), because 'for Paul, the messianic ... is a caesura that divides the division between times, ... a zone of undecidability ... [M]essianic time is neither the complete nor the incomplete, neither the past nor the future, but the inversion of both' (*TTR*, 74-5). Described in these highly deconstructive terms, it might well become hard to see how Agamben's messianic time could have anything whatever to do with Cavellian tragic time: they emerge from such utterly divergent sub-disciplines of philosophy and set out their temporalities in terminology so different that it is far from easy to compare them, or to place them in any meaningful relation to each other. Both Agamben's messianic sense of the contemporary and Cavell's tragic sense of the continuous present are faced, however, with a similar challenge: how can a temporality that is in both cases rooted in 'the now' speak towards a futurity, let alone redeem it? If what is required of the audience in a tragedy is to acknowledge what is before them now, then how can tragedy deliver an ethical message that its audience is to know will hold good once they have left

the theatre? T.S. Eliot puts the problem neatly and succinctly by stating that ‘If all time is eternally present / All time is unredeemable’.²² For Cavell’s tragic ‘continuous present’ and for Agamben’s messianic time of ‘the contemporary’ to hold any water, this seemingly intuitive statement will have to prove false.

I want to suggest that, in Cavell’s case at least, the key to finding a way of experiencing time such that one’s complete involvement in the present is not undermined by attending simultaneously to the redemptive demands of a yet-to-come future can be found in the very place that we began by problematising: the space of the theater itself. Cavell asks of those who upbraid Desdemona’s would-be rescuer by enjoining him to ‘remember that he is in a theater’: ‘How do I remember something there is no obvious way for me to forget?’ (*MWM*, 319). It can therefore be inferred that however fully we immerse ourselves in the present of the characters on stage before us, we do not (cannot) lose sight of the fact that our presents cannot coincide forever: the denouement will play itself out to a tragic end, the curtains will come down, the house lights will illuminate, and eventually the audience will leave the theatre. This much is obvious. In discussing the problem of how acknowledgement of the characters on stage can ever be complete, Mulhall says that ‘in a theatre something is omitted which must be made good outside.’²³ This statement is suggestive for two reasons: firstly, if the audience is aware that different conventions pertain outside the theatre and inside it, then they must be aware that the ‘continuous present’ of the theatre is not a permanent temporality and that it will end once the play they are watching ends – but the awareness that they are in what can only be called a ‘temporary temporality’ does not appear to interfere with or detract from their

involvement in acknowledgement of the tragic present in any way. Secondly, Mulhall's phrase 'made good' suggests that there is something redemptive, perhaps even messianic, about the ending of tragic temporality and the leaving of a theatre to enter into a space where we can at last make good on the ethical demands that tragedy makes on us. It is in the possibility of a connection between these two implications of Mulhall's statement that I sense a strong family resemblance with Agamben's messianic conception of the contemporary.

For Agamben, the definition of messianic time is '*the time that time takes to come to an end*' (*TTR*, 64 – emphasis in original). That is, 'the messianic is not the end of time, but the time of the end. ... [I]t is not the instant in which time ends, but ... the time that remains between time and its end' (*TTR*, 62). It seems to me that this would also be a good description of the time of tragedy as experienced by its audience. The member of an audience at a tragedy will no doubt be aware that what they are watching takes place in 'the time of the now', but this is accompanied by an awareness that, precisely because of the impending denouement that will end the drama and the curtains that are waiting to come down, the time of what we are watching is also 'a time that begins to end', which is precisely how Agamben, drawing on Pauline formulations of 'the time that remains' and 'the time that is left us [*il tempo che ci resta*]', characterises messianic time (*TTR*, 64; 68). However invested in the present plight of Othello or Hamlet one may be, one nevertheless cannot avoid a growing awareness that their story will inevitably reach its denouement and draw to an end, and one cannot avoid the knowledge that the curtain will then fall and we will rise from our seats to leave the theater and rejoin the outside world.

I see no need for this knowledge to entail an avoidance of the claims of tragedy: it is merely the unavoidable knowledge that the time of tragedy is discontinuous with the time of the world, which is what Cavell's argument is predicated on. In other words, tragedy's time of the now must and will come to an end – it is, in fact, a time that is inexorably ending itself, right before us in each present moment – and its audience knows this. Now, if it is true that we cannot avoid this knowledge, then, at least from a Cavellian point of view, it must also be true that we cannot exactly acknowledge it either. Instead, the audience's experience is not unlike that of Agamben's messianic time – experiencing the time that is left us (in which the 'us' also includes Othello or Hamlet or the characters on stage) as a time that is made urgent and aporetic by our knowledge that it is coming to an end. As if to prove this point, Agamben himself uses the experience of being 'spectators' to differentiate messianic time from chronological time:

Whereas our representation of chronological time, as the time *in which* we are, separates us from ourselves and transforms us into impotent spectators of ourselves – spectators who look at the time that flies without any time left, continually missing themselves – messianic time, an operational time in which we take hold of and achieve our representations of time, is the time *that* we ourselves are, and for this very reason, it is the only real time, the only time we have. (*TTR*, 68)

It should be clear from this that rather than blinding us with a redemptive futurity that condemns us to an avoidance of the present, messianic time is on the contrary geared principally towards an acknowledgement of the now, and that entering into it is in

essence a very similar thing to a Cavellian acknowledging of the present and the presence of the other and of myself.

When Agamben characterizes the contemporary as ‘that part within the present that we are absolutely incapable of living’ (‘WITC’, 51), he is describing precisely the experience of time that Cavell envisages an audience member undergoing in entering into the present of characters who are enacting their tragedy before us in the now, but separated from us by their being on stage. To be a spectator of tragedy as Cavell understands it, then, is to be what Agamben describes as contemporary: ‘And to be contemporary means in this sense to return to a present where we have never been’ (‘WITC’, 51-2). There would be nothing remarkable about this if it were simply a claim that both Agamben’s ‘contemporary’ and Cavell’s ‘tragedy’ entailed a sense of disjuncture or rupture in the moment of the present – that would hardly differentiate them from St Augustine or Bergson. What is suggestive here is Agamben’s assertion that a contemporary is one who ‘is capable of transforming [the present] and putting it in relation with other times’ (‘WITC’, 53). An audience member, then, becomes what Agamben calls a contemporary not merely by bridging the gulf between their own present and that of the characters on the stage, but, further, in perceiving and building relations between their present and other times or temporalities which can transform the present itself. This offers us a way of understanding how our experience of tragedy, so deeply rooted in an experience of presentness, can nevertheless address itself towards a futurity in a redemptive, even messianic, sense. As Agamben puts it, ‘messianic time aims toward the fulfillment of time’ (‘WITC’, 75).

What is so congenial about reading this insight alongside Cavell's view of tragedy is that it welds tragedy's ethical orientation towards futurity and redemption with its rootedness in the moment of the present. To borrow a phrase from Lawrence Rhu, 'Such a moment happens in time, but it can also alter time'.²⁴ And that is how this theatre does its ethical work on its audience. Notwithstanding the cliché, Cavell's writings on tragedy, like the Shakespearean drama they analyse, are of a special urgency because they demonstrate that, when it comes to questions of ethics, there is no time like the present.

¹ Stanley Cavell, *Must We Mean What We Say? A Book of Essays*, updated edition. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 346. Hereafter *MWM*.

² Tragedy has played a role in all of Cavell's contributions to ethics and moral philosophy, ranging from his exploration of its relation to ordinary language philosophy in *The Claim of Reason*, to his articulations of Emersonian Moral Perfectionism, to his recent engagements with Emanuel Levinas. For a useful discussion of these three aspects of Cavell's philosophy, their interrelatedness, and their differences, See Espen Hammer, *Stanley Cavell: Skepticism, Subjectivity, and the Ordinary* (Cambridge: Polity, 2002), esp. Chapter 5, "Ethics and Politics", 119-147.

³ For a critique of Cavell's parable of the Southern yokel, see Michael Bristol, *Big-Time Shakespeare* (London: Routledge, 1996), 198-9.

⁴ Stanley Cavell, *Themes Out of School: Effects and Causes* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 87.

⁵ Cavell's engagement with Levinas is articulated in his essay "What is the Scandal of Skepticism?" in *Philosophy the Day After Tomorrow* (Cambridge, Mass: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2004), 132-54. The best discussion of the relationship between Cavell's and Levinas's philosophies is Paul Standish, "Education for Grown-Ups, a Religion for Adults: Scepticism and Alterity in Cavell and Levinas", *Ethics and Education* 2 (2007): 73-91.

⁶ Michael Fischer, *Stanley Cavell and Literary Skepticism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 97.

⁷ Stanley Cavell, *The Claim of Reason: Wittgenstein, Skepticism, Morality, and Tragedy*, new edition. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 434. Hereafter *CoR*.

⁸ Stephen Mulhall, *Stanley Cavell: Philosophy's Recounting of the Ordinary* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994), 200.

⁹ Hammer, 91.

¹⁰ There is not, alas, room here to explain or explore what Cavell means by ‘skepticism’, since it is one of the central terms throughout his thought. For an early and concise account of Cavellian skepticism, see Richard Eldridge’s “‘A Continuing Task’: Cavell and the Truth of Skepticism” in *The Senses of Stanley Cavell*, eds. Richard Fleming and Michael Payne (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 1989), 73-89. More recently and more expansively, see Hammer, 2002.

¹¹ Mulhall, 198-99.

¹² Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value*, ed. G. H. von Wright, trans. Peter Winch (Oxford: Blackwell, 1980), 12e.

¹³ Cavell gives a great deal of consideration to this mistaken view, in order to locate exactly where its mistake lies. See, in particular, *MWM*, 341.

¹⁴ And for Wittgenstein. He immediately disavows his observation, calling it ‘a one-sided view of tragedy’.

¹⁵ Besides the temptation to respond to tragedy in terms of a cause-and-effect temporality, there are doubtless other time-related temptations that can distract us from participation in the temporality of tragedy, and hence in its audience. We may well succumb to the temptation to abstract ourselves from the present scene to anticipate whether an actor is going to prove equal to the challenge of the finale, or to the temptation just to look at our watch and wonder how long there is left till the interval, and so our participation in the time of tragedy and the audience of tragedy is not to be taken for granted.

¹⁶ Garrett Stewart appears to suggest something similar in his claim that ‘the complementary relation between the skeptical and the theatrical installed by tragedy becomes a corrective one.’ See his “The Avoidance of Stanley Cavell” in *Contending with Stanley Cavell*, ed. Russell B. Goodman (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 140-156, 146.

¹⁷ For some of Cavell’s comments on how his concept of the ‘present’ relates to the deconstructive notion of metaphysics of presence, see his *In Quest of the Ordinary: Lines of Skepticism and Romanticism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 174.

¹⁸ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Untimely Meditations*, trans. R.J. Hollingdale (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 213.

¹⁹ See Giorgio Agamben, “What is the Contemporary?” in *What is an Apparatus? And other essays*, trans. David Kishik and Stefan Pedatella, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009), 39-54, 52, hereafter ‘WITC’. See also Agamben’s *The Time That Remains: a Commentary on the Letter to the Romans* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005) – hereafter *TTR* – for a comparison between Agamben’s idea of the contemporary and Walter Benjamin’s notion of *Jetztzeit*.

²⁰ The quotation is from Barthes’s lectures at the *Collège de France*.

²¹ Stanley Cavell, *Disowning Knowledge in Seven Plays of Shakespeare*, updated ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 211.

²² T.S. Eliot, “Burnt Norton” in *The Four Quartets* (London: Faber & Faber, 2001), l. 4-5.

²³ Mulhall, 198.

²⁴ Lawrence F. Rhu, *Stanley Cavell’s American Dream: Shakespeare, Philosophy, and Hollywood Movies* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2006), 202.