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Reply to Crewe and Conant

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# Critical Response

## III

### Reply to Crewe and Conant

#### Gerald L. Bruns

I am impressed by how angry Jonathan Crewe is, but I found his remarks confused and unclear and so I'm uncertain how to reply. Whatever the matter is, he wants "to forestall a sense of academic obligation on anyone's part (for example, on the part of students) to work back to Cavell *through* Bruns" (p. 612). God knows this might be a good idea, judging from what James Conant says.

Conant's criticisms are directed at the section of my paper called "The Moral of Skepticism," which he cannot help wanting to rewrite, since he has a much more intimate grasp of Cavell's thinking than I have. I imagined myself on the outside of Cavell's texts, trying to characterize them in a certain way, not on the inside, giving an account of their genesis. Obviously my paper is neither philosophy nor literary criticism but a crossdressing of the two that is bound to make someone like Crewe bite his teeth. I appreciate Conant's forbearance.

Conant is certainly right to complain that I didn't stop to get things clear, as for example about material-object versus other-minds skepticism. I did think, evidently mistakenly, that I had it right when I said that what Othello wants is to experience Desdemona's self-experience, that is, he wants to get inside of her—inside of her mind, if it makes sense to put it that way. No one thinks the problem with desks and chairs is that we can't get inside of them. And certainly I take Conant's point that Cavell is not to be thought of as promoting skepticism. It is odd, isn't it, to think of "living one's skepticism" as if it meant practicing it, as if skepticism could be a form of life. Imagine a culture of skeptics where realists are self-refuting! I

didn't think I was saying that Cavell endorses skepticism, only that if we try to refute it we will have missed its truth and may end up doing some violence in the bargain. And I understand that forgoing knowledge does not just mean accepting the limits of reason.

My interests are far down the register from Conant's. What interests me is how skepticism and poetry seem obstacles to philosophy in roughly symmetrical ways. If we want to understand what poetry is, this is part of what we need to understand, but it's not easy to feel the force of the issue, partly of course because poetry is not just one thing. But, historically and theoretically, philosophy thinks it can't get itself started until it refutes the skeptic and banishes the poet. I thought maybe Cavell, at a certain point, could help me understand how these two philosophical actions are linked, although of course he does not suggest any link himself. The relation between skepticism and tragedy in Cavell's work is different from this. It's just that nowadays we've all been converted to some form of antifoundationalism, and this makes us want to say that skepticism and the old quarrel between philosophy and poetry are trivial or merely rhetorical topics. Cavell is an antifoundationalist who still seriously wonders about these things. Like Martin Heidegger, Jacques Derrida, and Emmanuel Levinas, but unlike Richard Rorty and most analytical philosophers whom I am able to read (Arthur Danto, Martha Nussbaum, a few others), Cavell is interested in what resists philosophy, or in what philosophy seems to exclude or repress in its desire for self-understanding. Madness, bodies, ordinary life—what else? Philosophy (and of course not just philosophy) defines these things by sealing itself off from them.

To be sure, philosophy is not any one thing either, no more than poetry is. Conant says that by philosophy I mean the Continental tradition as against Anglo-American philosophers (whom Cavell addresses and to whom he holds himself accountable). Actually things are much worse than Conant imagines. What I had in mind was the picture of the philosopher (or whatever) in Immanuel Kant's "What Is Enlightenment?" Kant's enlightened person is disengaged from the world's discourses and so is able to adjudicate among them, correcting them where they go wrong, explaining their invincible ignorance. I think that, disclaimers aside, most philosophers on both sides of the Atlantic still see themselves in this picture. Of course no one champions Kant's idea so strenuously as Jürgen Habermas, who thinks the task of the philosopher is to preside over the

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lifeworld, where he supervises, among other things, the rewriting of poetry in order to make it consistent with the ideal norms of communicative praxis. God help the world in which poetry is on the loose, leveling philosophy. Cavell sits elsewhere, more down-to-earth, since what occupies him is the special way in which the philosopher suffers from human separateness, both his or her own as well as others'. On reading Conant's attempt to control my damage I thought of W. V. O. Quine's radical translator and the incommensurability of conceptual schemes. Imagine the philosopher not as recording angel but as an anthropologist plunked down in the midst of alien cultures, some of which are appropriating him for their own magical purposes. This may be how it is now between philosophy and literary criticism.

I can't resist a last try at the problem of limits. Of course there's a difference between acknowledging limits and acknowledging other people, but it might depend on the situation and how limits are embodied. This might not make much sense philosophically, but one likes to think about limits that aren't purely theoretical. One might think, for example, of René Descartes and his fascination with automatons. For him an automaton was something to watch. Naturally the big thing is to know how it works. A Cavellian version of this would have the automaton fixing me (Descartes) with its look, as if recognizing me.<sup>1</sup> I know there's nothing between us, but what was the meaning of the momentary fright the thing just gave me? That something was about to go out of control? Cavell might rephrase this: That I was about to be exposed? (To whom? To what? As what?) For a moment anyway I was connected to the thing differently, not as knowing. So there are limits and there are limits, or rather there is acknowledging a limit in the sense of accepting it, and then there is being exposed to it the way Lear is, having to respond to it, if only out of fear, that is, to act or suffer in consequence of the way suddenly it bears down like fate. What's Lear exposed to, anyway? Our relation to the world, supposing the world to be made of other people, is not one of knowing, nor (to be sure) is it one of *not* knowing, but our position with respect to it as knowing subjects is fragile in a different way from Kant's idea about how far reason extends. This says nothing so far about the fragility of the world, for, fearing the weakness of our position, what might we do to the world to secure ourselves against it? Admittedly I may be making Cavell sound more like Levinas than a student of his can bear.<sup>2</sup> Understand that I am not glossing Cavell here but only trying to get at something he said.

Or take the relation between philosophy and nonphilosophy. Of course we can't determine this relation conceptually. As someone might

1. This is a travesty of my favorite section of Stanley Cavell, *The Claim of Reason: Wittgenstein, Skepticism, Morality, and Tragedy* (Oxford, 1979), pp. 411–18.

2. On the relation between Levinas and Cavell, see Gerald L. Bruns, "Dialogue and the Truth of Skepticism," *Religion and Literature* 22 (Summer 1990): 85–91.

phrase it, struggling for suitable language, the extension of the concept of philosophy cannot be closed by a frontier. Still, there are resistances, possibly of the sort that I was trying to locate at the very end of my paper when I tried to characterize Cavell's idea of the stillness of the text as poetry's historic refusal of philosophy ("Nothing, my lord"). Aristotelians on the whole miss this refusal or try to play it down. The idea is that poetry seems to embody philosophy's limits. This doesn't have to mean that poetry is therefore outside of philosophy in the sense of beyond its ken, only that it cannot be brought under its control, or is always alien or excessive or a danger to any world philosophy imagines for itself or helps to construct. But here I confess I've turned bandit and am taking Cavell's thoughts down a path that may be all weeds and worms to him, and where I will end up I can't be sure.<sup>3</sup>

3. Clearly a line of thinking is called for here that I can't pursue in this space. I've tried to make some headway in my *Heidegger's Estrangements: Language, Truth, and Poetry in the Later Writings* (New Haven, Conn., 1989). See, for example, pp. 183–87. At the risk of enraging Crewe further, let me quote the following (Antonin Artaud on the Marx Brothers) by way of suggestion:

In *Animal Crackers* when a woman suddenly falls over backward on a sofa with her legs in the air and for a split second shows us everything we might want to see, when a man suddenly grabs a woman in a drawing room, does a few dance steps with her, and slaps her on the behind in time to the music, a kind of intellectual freedom is exercised in which the unconscious of each character, repressed by customs and conventions, avenges itself and our unconscious at the same time. But in *Monkey Business* when a man wanted by the police grabs a beautiful woman and dances with her, *poetically*, with a kind of serious pursuit of the charm and grace of attitude, here the claim made on our sensibility seems double, and demonstrates all that is poetic and perhaps even revolutionary in the jokes of the Marx Brothers.

But the fact that the music to which the couple consisting of the wanted man and the beautiful woman dance is a music of nostalgia and escape, *a music of deliverance*, sufficiently indicates the dangerous side of all these funny jokes, and shows that when the poetic spirit is exercised, it always moves toward a kind of seething anarchy, a total breakdown of reality by poetry.

Naturally it's this last line that gets me. The passage is from Antonin Artaud, *The Theater and Its Double*, in *Antonin Artaud: Selected Writings*, trans. Helen Weaver, ed. Susan Sontag (Berkeley, 1988), p. 241.