

Seeing Selves and Imagining Others: Aesthetic Interpretation and the Claim to Community in Cavell

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Politics is aesthetic in principle.

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From his early childhood, Stanley Cavell learned to tread carefully the intervening space between twin pillars: of aesthetic sensibility on the one hand, and political belonging on the other. Early in his memoir *Little Did I Know*, Cavell establishes a set of differences between his mother and father that far exceed both gender and age (his father was ten years older than his mother), as he notes the starkly contrasting dispensations of their respective families:

The artistic temperament of my mother's family, the Segals, left them on the whole, with the exception of my mother and her baby brother, Mendel, doubtfully suited to an orderly, successful existence in the new world; the orthodox, religious sensibility of my father's family, the Goldsteins, produced a second generation—some twenty-two first cousins of mine—whose solidarity and severity of expectation produced successful dentists, lawyers, and doctors, pillars of the Jewish community, and almost without exception attaining local, some of them national, some even a certain international, prominence.¹

From his mother's family, Cavell would inherit the musical sensibility that, had he not ventured into the world of academic philosophy, might have led him towards a career as a musician or in music. In his father's family Cavell observes a religious belonging that, in the decades in which Cavell is raised, becomes morally inseparable from politi-

1. Cavell, *Little Did I Know: Excerpts from Memory* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010), 3.

cal belonging, as the rise of European anti-Semitism and the threat of Hitler's ascent to power would drastically alter the political significance of Jewish religious identification.

Indeed, at the end of his first entry in the memoir (which is written as a series of diary entries), Cavell recognizes that he had previously cited the work Vladimir Jankelevitch not because of Jankelevitch's interest in music, but because with Hitler's rise "Jankelevitch forswore forever reading and mentioning German philosophy and listening to German music."² Jankelevitch's "practice of ... renunciation," which for Cavell is common practice in the teaching of philosophy, becomes a productive philosophical counterpoint: the aim of the philosopher, as Cavell articulates it in the next entry, is "to write, however limitedly, the autobiography of a species; if not of humanity as a whole, then representative of anyone who finds himself or herself in it."³ The claim to community is a dominant trend in Cavell's philosophy from *Must We Mean What We Say?* and *The Claim of Reason to Philosophy the Day After Tomorrow* and is perhaps his most important inheritance from the work of Wittgenstein and Austin, which Cavell summarizes succinctly in the memoir: "this is how I have understood Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations* and J. L. Austin's procedures, in their appeals to the language of everyday, or ordinary language, namely, that I speak philosophically for others when they recognize what I say as what they would say, recognize that their language is mine, or put otherwise, that language is ours, that we are speakers" (6). If, as Cavell posits, the project of the philosopher—or at least the philosopher of ordinary language—is to "speak philosophically for others," then Jankelevitch's renunciation of German philosophy and German music becomes inherently inimical to the practice of philosophy. The renunciation would put Cavell at odds with both the philosopher he loved most, the Austrian Wittgenstein, who fought for the Central Powers in WWI and who, in struggling with own Jewishness, made anti-Semitic remarks that were uncomfortably similar to the rhetoric of the Nazi party (comments he abandoned, thankfully, as the Nazi party rose to power)⁴; and also at

2. *Ibid.*, 5.

3. *Ibid.*, 6.

4. See Ray Monk, *Ludwig Wittgenstein: The Duty of Genius* (London: Penguin, 1990), 313-17. Monk situates Wittgenstein's anti-Semitism within a broad context of European anti-Semitic sentiment, and notes that Wittgenstein never fully believed his own anti-Semitism. Indeed, Wittgenstein was horrified by the developments leading up the WWII, and his family faced grave dangers because of their Jewish background. See also Marjorie Perloff, "To Become a Different Person': Wittgenstein, Christianity, and the Modernist Ethos," in *Wittgenstein and Modernism*, ed. Michael Lemahieu and Karen Zumhagen-Yekplé (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2017), 41-56.

odds with the German musical tradition of Bach, Mozart, and Beethoven (all of whom are referenced throughout *Little Did I Know*) that was so important to his early musical education.⁵

If I'm overstating the contrast between the aesthetic and the political in the early years of Cavell's personal life, it's to try to understand how these contrasting dispensations shaped his philosophical work. As I'll demonstrate in the rest of the essay, there is a strong impetus in Cavell towards bridging the aesthetic and the political, though in a vastly different vein than Benjamin's aestheticization of politics. I argue, contra Benjamin, that Cavell is interested in the politicization of aesthetics, in understanding how the modes of thought that characterize aesthetic judgment are fundamental to our participation in civic life. For Cavell, to engage aesthetic objects is, as Kant suggested, to make yourself known to others, to unveil something about yourself and your world-view, and (as Cavell says elsewhere about "passionate utterances")⁶ to invite others to share in your sense of how the world strikes you. In his writings on both aesthetic experience and political engagement, Cavell relies on a notion of subjective expression that is subtly but seriously committed to interpersonal and communal interaction.

This is to say neither that art underpins our political institutions nor that it provides definitions and arguments for individual rights. Nor is it to suggest that art and political life are merely analogous; it is not that some aspect of our aesthetic experience have surprising but inconsequential overlap with our understanding of the lives of others. Rather, this essay draws on recent work on the relationship between politics and aesthetics and traces the considerable extent to which making aesthetic judgments entails the sorts of activities—imagining and interpreting another's subjectivity, understanding your own relation to another, giving voice to an argument that you want others to accept even as you recognize that they may not—that are essential

5. Cavell recognizes the potential political danger of claiming to speak for others, especially when you claim to speak for a disadvantaged or politically oppressed group. He recognizes, moreover, that those speaking from positions of oppression might balk at the suggestion that their words be seemingly stripped of the historically specific conditions that prompted them and accepted instead as a universalist creed of common human belonging—Cavell confesses "that certain women I know who write philosophically would not at all be glad to adopt this posture," (*Little Did I Know*, 6) and the same may be true for other historically disenfranchised groups who feel the power of oppression and the weight of history bearing down on their shoulders.

6. Cavell, *Philosophy the Day After Tomorrow* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press/Harvard University Press, 2005).

to the formation of political communities. Moreover, I argue that for Cavell (and by extension for Wittgenstein) our experience of others is itself an aesthetic one, most evident in Cavell's explication of Wittgenstein's famously cryptic remarks about seeing something as something.⁷ The world of appearances, whether the face in a painting or the face of an other, motivates our understanding of our place in relation to the world around us. Coming to speak philosophically for others—and being able to recognize when they speak for us—relies on practices of visual perception, interpretation, and aesthetic judgement, all of which inform our ability to see others and their words as criteria for community.

Critical thought on the relationship between aesthetics and politics has long been haunted by Benjamin's warnings about the Fascist threat inherent to the aestheticization of politics. In recent years, however, philosophers and theorists have begun to rethink the role aesthetics can play in the development of political thought. Most prominently, Jacques Rancière has suggested "There is thus an 'aesthetics' at the core of politics that has nothing to do with Benjamin's discussion of the 'aestheticization of politics' specific to the 'age of the masses'. This aesthetics should not be understood as the perverse commandeering of politics by a will to art."⁸ Rather, Rancière continues, aesthetics is "a delimitation of spaces and times, of the visible and the invisible, of speech and noise, that simultaneously determines the place and the stakes of politics as a form of experience. Politics revolves around what is seen and what can be said about it, around who has the ability to see and the talent to speak, around the properties of spaces and the possibilities of time."⁹ Indeed, Cavell's work often bears directly on questions of how aesthetic attunement can inform our political sensibility. As Nikolas Kompridis points out in the introduction to his edited collection *The Aesthetic Turn in Political Thought* (2014),

7. Cf. *The Claim of Reason: Wittgenstein, Skepticism, Morality, and Tragedy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), 354-90.

8. Jacques Rancière, *The Distribution of the Sensible* (London: Continuum, 2004), 13.

9. Rancière, *Distribution of the Sensible*, 13. Building on the work of Rancière, David Panagia seeks to explore the ways in which our everyday interactions with the world of appearances are at once aesthetic and political. See his *Ten Theses for an Aesthetics of Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2016). Panagia pushes back against the idea that aesthetic judgment is purely sensory, and therefore shouldn't have a place in political discourse that should strive (on certain accounts) to be purely rational. Characterizing the view he works against, Panagia writes, "if it is true that instances of aesthetic appreciation are akin to intellectual stultification, and if spectatorship is characterized as a space of distraction from what is properly political, then the everyday moments we all have of looking, hearing, touching, tasting, and smelling, and those minute instances whereby we derive an unverifiable sense of pleasure or disturbance from such moments of aesthetic appreciation, are simply bad" (xii).

there are problems of politics that can appear as political problems only in an aesthetic dimension. Adapting a thought of Stanley Cavell's for our own purposes, we might say that the aesthetic turn consists in political thought's recognition of and response to the *aesthetic problems of modern politics*. We can give them the following names: the problem of voice and voicelessness, the problem of the new, the problem of integrating (rather than dichotomizing) the ordinary and the extraordinary, the problem of judgment, the problem of responsiveness and receptivity, the problem of appearance, and of what is given to sense to make sense of, and, more generally, the problem of the meaning and scope of the aesthetic dimension of politics.¹⁰

For Kompridis, attention to these questions (of voice and voicelessness, ordinary and extraordinary, judgments and appearances) in political thought might come to supplement questions about justice, liberty, and constitution, staking out a political terrain that is implicitly aesthetic. As Andrew Norris has argued, the emphasis in political philosophy on questions of justice and liberty over judgment and appearance probably explains the relative dearth of attention Cavell has received as a political thinker. Noting that Cavell has received far more attention as someone interested in skepticism, Norris suggests that it is nonetheless surprising that the political implications of his thought have been undervalued; Cavell is interested, after all, in understanding how "Who *we* are and what beliefs and actions *we* are committed to is something only you and I and others joining us can say. Our common identity is articulated in conversations in which we as individuals give and weigh our reasons, our sense of what should count for us, and why."¹¹

This work provides a foundation from which we can begin to understand the extent of Cavell's interest in the political dimension of aesthetic judgment. I'm particularly interested in the expanded notions of the aesthetic that many of these thinkers employ. Kompridis casts the aesthetic in contexts beyond the mere appreciation of art and writes, "By 'aesthetic' or 'aesthetics' we mean much more than a specialized inquiry into the nature of art, artworks, or beauty, grounded in a sensuous, usually

10. Nikolas Kompridis, ed., *The Aesthetic Turn in Political Thought* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2014), xix-xx.

11. Andrew Norris, "Stanley Cavell and the Claim to Community," in *The Claim to Community: Essays on Stanley Cavell and Political Philosophy*, ed. Norris (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006), 2.

non-cognitive, mode of perception. What is meant is something much wider in scope, something that is still being explored and mapped, something directly implicated in what counts as cognition, reason, experience, meaning and agency.”¹² “The aesthetic” complicates modes of engagement, especially epistemologically oriented ones, that structure our experience of the world. That is, for Kompridis, aesthetics is not simply a sensuous contrast to the cognitive, it also asks us to reconsider what cognition looks like. Specifically, and as I elaborate later in the essay, aesthetic judgment is for Cavell a moment of revelatory expression, an effort to make yourself known and to invite others to see the world how you see the world.

Making yourself known or revealing yourself in the face of the other is inherently a political act, though political, it should be clear, only in a specialized and broad sense. That is, like many of the thinkers I’ve cited above, I don’t claim here to demonstrate the ways in which aesthetic experience and aesthetic judgment modify or inform political institutions, nor do I hope to suggest that aesthetic judgements disguise (or betray) political ideologies. Rather, I’m interested in how the process of articulating one’s sensibility is fundamental both to making aesthetic judgments and the formation of political life. For Cavell, community is that which fosters intersubjective expression: “To speak for oneself politically is to speak for the other with whom you consent to association, and it is to consent to be spoken for by them.”¹³ Recognizing the other as an agent that might speak for me, and understanding my own relation to her and her words, is the foundation of both aesthetic and political life. Just as crucial, however, is the possibility of disagreement, since, as Cavell puts it, “To speak for yourself means the rebuff [...] of those for whom you claimed to be speaking; and it means risking having to rebuff [...] those who claimed to be speaking for you.”¹⁴ The definition of community and political life that Cavell provides is not homogenous, and not one that seeks to erase or overlook the differences between us. On the contrary, Cavell defines political life by beginning from the premise that we are different, that we occupy distinct subjectivities, and that my words won’t necessarily be yours; and yet sometimes we find ourselves in the words of others. Consider, for example, Stephen Mulhall’s suggestion that “aesthetic debate is thus a way of cons-

12. Kompridis, ed., *The Aesthetic Turn in Political Thought*, xvi.

13. Cavell, *The Claim of Reason*, 27.

14. *Ibid.*, 27.

trusting or discovering community through the articulation and development of individuality; it shows a way in which community can be founded upon the fuller expression, rather than the complete repression, of individuality.”¹⁵ Political community, like aesthetic experience, depends upon the ability to articulate a subjectivity even while we embrace the subjectivity and the individuality of others.

As is clear from much of Cavell’s work, to belong to a community depends on the ability to communicate and to be understood, and Cavell’s early essay “Aesthetic Problems of Modern Philosophy” is first and foremost an essay about communicating an understanding, and about understanding the act of communication. While he spends the first half of the essay discussing the paraphrasability of metaphor, poetry as a “formulable” art, and the atonality of modern music, Cavell characteristically refuses to come down on one side of the issues he raises. His point, of course, is not that the issue is too complex to decide one way or another, but rather to demonstrate how we might think about difficult poetry, or difficult music. “Brooks is wrong to say that poems cannot in principle be fully paraphrased,” Cavell writes, “but right to be worried about the relation between paraphrase and poem.”¹⁶ To be worried about the relation between paraphrase and poem is not, for Cavell, justification for the belief that poems cannot be paraphrased. As Cavell suggests, this “has the gait of a false issue”¹⁷ because Brooks has misunderstood the role of the critic, whose job is not (or shouldn’t be) to denounce paraphrase as a poetic impossibility but rather to model the sorts of problems that paraphrase poses.¹⁸ Sometimes when dealing with difficult poetry, such as Hart Crane or Wallace Stevens, we may realize that we are “able to say nothing [about what the lines mean] except that a feeling has been voiced by a kindred spirit and that if someone does not get it he is not in one’s world, or not of one’s flesh.”¹⁹ Art, then, allows us to recognize the standards by which we judge not just art, but also our connection to those

15. Stephen Mulhall, *Stanley Cavell: Philosophy’s Recounting of the Ordinary* (Oxford: Clarendon Press/Oxford University Press, 1994), 29. Mulhall continues, acknowledging that “If this sort of community can result only from abandoning the guarantee of agreement, then it is hardly surprising that we sometimes choose abandonment” (29).

16. Cavell, *Must We Mean What We Say?: A Book of Essays*, updated edn. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 82.

17. *Ibid.*, 75.

18. As Anthony Cascardi has written, criticism for Cavell “is a way of engaging those things that philosophy—whether as epistemology or as metaphysics—had learned to avoid.” Cascardi, “Cavell and Kant: The Work of Criticism and the Work of Art,” in *Stanley Cavell and Literary Studies: Consequences of Skepticism*, ed. Richard Eldridge and Bernard Rhie (New York: Continuum, 2011), 48.

19. Cavell, *Must We Mean What We Say?*, 81.

around us, while criticism is the route that bridges us. The successful critic is able to communicate what she sees in the work of art, and to get others to see it there too.²⁰

“Aesthetic Problems of Modern Philosophy” demonstrates Cavell’s commitment to approaching aesthetic judgment as an act of communal understanding and expression. The essay is devoted not to understanding whether modern music is or might be atonal, and not to arguing straightforwardly that it is tonal; rather, Cavell is interested in interrogating the habits of mind and speech that allow us to voice arguments intelligibly, in understanding how we communicate our aesthetic commitments and, moreover, how expressions of aesthetic understanding either contribute to or undermine our appeals to community. Cavell writes about how “we may find ourselves *within* the experience of such compositions, following them” and suggests that “then the question whether this is music and the problem its tonal sense, will be—not answered or solved, but rather they will disappear, seem irrelevant.”²¹ If we find ourselves within and following a composition, we might be tempted to say that the composition—like the work of good philosophy, in Cavell’s sense—speaks for us, that we can identify with it, that we can see ourselves in the composition. This sense of identification, of finding ourselves in a work, justifies our aesthetic engagement and, moreover, the Kantian sense that others can, or should, or must, see what we see in a work of art. “It is essential,” Cavell writes “to making an aesthetic judgment that at some point we be prepared to say in its support: don’t you see, don’t you hear, don’t you dig?”²² Two things are striking about the passage: the first, that it is *essential* in

20. Cf. Cavell’s discussion of a passage in Hume, who cites a story from *Don Quixote* wherein two men taste supposedly excellent wine. One man proclaims the wine very good, but notes a hint of leather, while the other, agreeing that it is good, suggests a taste of iron; they find, in the bottom of the cask, a key with a leather thong attached to it. “All that makes the critic’s expression of taste worth more than another man’s” Cavell writes, here of the wine critic, “is his ability to produce for himself the thong and key of his response; and his vindication comes not from his pointing out that it is, or was, in the barrel, but in getting us to taste it there.” *Ibid.*, 87.

21. *Ibid.*, 84. Cavell is following the early and late Wittgenstein, whom he cites on the subsequent page. Cavell summarizes, “the problems of life and the problems of philosophy have related grammars, because solutions to them both have the same form: their problems are solved only when they disappear, and answers arrived at only when there are no longer questions—when, as it were, our accounts have cancelled them” (85).

22. *Ibid.*, 93. Recently, Rita Felski has argued for the value of what she calls “attachment theory,” a notion with links to Cavell’s ideas about attunement, in making aesthetic judgments. She thinks, rightly in my view, that we’ve deeply misunderstood the value of our emotional connection to art objects, and that approaching questions of aesthetic engagement vis-à-vis the attachments we form might shed some light on what we do as critics and, perhaps more importantly, why. Her book on these topics has yet to be published; she’s offered talks at the 2017 MLA Convention in Philadelphia and other venues on the subject.

Cavell's view that to make an aesthetic judgment is to be impelled to communicate, to have the desire to be understood, and to make a claim to community; the second, that in making aesthetic judgments, we become ready to abandon argument. While he admits that "the best critic will know the best points",²³ his suggestion that the claim to community takes the form "don't you see, don't you dig" admits that, somewhere, arguments and reasons come to an end.²⁴

Aesthetic judgment is important for Cavell, then, because of the way in which it begets intersubjective expression and prompts us to imagine—or at least to hope to be able to imagine—the world of the other.²⁵ *Can't you see* isn't just a plea to get someone else to accept my view, but also a recognition that I don't necessarily see theirs; it's an admission of possible difference, and an admission that I may not be able to overcome this difference, and most importantly for Cavell, it's an invitation to *try* to overcome this difference. Aesthetic engagement is an exercise in attempting to understand, as the ordinary language philosopher feels compelled to understand, "what we say," not, as Cavell stresses, in an empirical sense, as if a collection of data could prove definitively that we say or don't say this or that, but in the sense that Cavell summarizes in his memoir, in the sense that productive philosophical discourse must have some bearing on what it means to belong to human community that has a sense of a shared history and culture. This is not, again, to erase the important differences between us, but to prompt introspection, to *look and see*, in Wittgenstein's language,²⁶ whether we can identify the ways in which someone else's words can speak for me: "the philosopher appealing to everyday language," Cavell writes, "turns to the reader not to convince him without proof but to get him to prove something, test something, against himself."²⁷ He continues: "All the philosopher, this kind of philo-

23. Cavell, *Must We Mean What We Say?*, 93.

24. Cavell is drawing on Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* (Oxford: Wiley Blackwell), §217; Cavell writes, "At some point, the critic will have to say: This is what I see. Reasons—at definite points, for definite reasons, in different circumstances—come to an end" (MWM 93). This is not to say, however, that aesthetic arguments are therefore shunned to the realm of the irrational, or destined to be forever inconclusive. "The arguments that support them [aesthetic judgments]," Cavell writes, "are not conclusive the way arguments in logic are, nor rational the way arguments in science are. [...] It does not follow, however, that such judgments are not conclusive and rational" (MWM 88).

25. For more on how Cavell's notion of the aesthetic resists or revises a conception of aesthetics that would emphasize social power and class distinction (such as in Bourdieu), see Benjamin Mangrum, "Bourdieu, Cavell, and the Politics of Aesthetic Value," in *Literature & Theology* 29.3 (2015): 260-83.

26. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, §66.

27. Cavell, *Must We Mean What We Say?*, 95.

sopher, can do is to express, as fully as he can, his world, and attract our undivided attention to our own.”²⁸

For Cavell, to bridge distinctive subjectivities requires active engagement, the willingness to test out the philosopher’s words against our own experience. It is well known that throughout his “Aesthetic Problems” essay, Cavell is interested in vanquishing the problems that philosophers of (particularly modern) art engage, not by providing answers to the questions they raise but attempting to show how a change in perspective—and, really, a *personal* change, a therapeutic change—can make certain problems seem to disappear. His efforts to dissolve certain of philosophy’s problems is distinctively Wittgensteinian.²⁹ The problems of both life and philosophy, Cavell writes, “are solved only when they disappear, and answers are arrived at only when there are no longer questions.”³⁰ This often means, in both Wittgenstein and Cavell, that we undertake to change something about ourselves, something about how we see the world.

Wittgenstein’s frequent appeals to visual perception³¹ are a way of encouraging philosophers to approach philosophy therapeutically: we can solve the problems of philosophy, and come to understand something about the world, not if we train our conceptual capabilities to practice theoretical acrobatics but by recognizing the patterns of our perceptions and seeking to change how we view the world. This means not only understanding and changing our perspective, but understanding how our perspective fits in the world, understanding our place in the world around us. “As usual,” Cavell writes in his commentary on Wittgenstein’s invocation of the *Weltanschauung*, “the claim to severe philosophical advance entails a reconception of the subject, a specific sense of revolution.”³² It’s not, in other words, *solely* about chan-

28. *Ibid.*, 96.

29. He cites Wittgenstein and writes: “In the *Tractatus* Wittgenstein says: ‘The solution of the problem of life is seen in the vanishing of the problem’ (6.521); and in the *Investigations* he says: ‘... the clarity that we are aiming at is indeed *complete* clarity. But this simply means that the philosophical problems should *completely* disappear’ (§133)” (*ibid.*, 85).

30. *Ibid.*, 85.

31. For example, in Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, §66: “look and see whether there is anything common to all [games]”; “don’t think, but look!” And, more importantly for Cavell, §122: “The concept of a surveyable representation [*übersichtlichen Darstellung*] is of fundamental significance for us. It characterizes the way we represent things, how we look at matters. (Is this a ‘Weltanschauung’?). (Before the fourth edition, “surveyable representation” was translated as “perspicuous representation.” Cavell uses “perspicuous,” because it was the translation at the time; today, many commentators still prefer “perspicuous,” despite the difficulties that prompted the change to “surveyable.”)

32. Cavell, *Must We Mean What We Say?*, 86.

ging your perspective, but about understanding your *Weltanschauung* and working, in a therapeutic sense, through the problems that have impeded you.

The term *Weltanschauung* invokes an aesthetically motivated politics, suggesting that our perception informs the beliefs we hold. Cavell links his writing on aesthetic judgment and political belonging most explicitly in his use of the term. Cavell writes, summarizing the segment on embryos, slaves, and humanity in *The Claim of Reason*:

I have wished to say that it is not a fact that human embryos are human beings and that it is nothing more than a fact that certain human beings are slaves. This may be to suggest that someone who expresses himself or herself otherwise inhabits a particular *Weltanschauung*; that the world, and himself in it, has struck him in a particular way.³³

Cavell has just finished arguing that the slaveowner does indeed see his slaves as people (and not as beasts, for example),³⁴ and has observed that the slave owner “in the end will appeal to history, to a form, or rather a way, of life: this is what he does. He believes exactly what justice denies, that history and indefinite difference can justify his social difference of position.”³⁵ Importantly for Cavell, in embracing a perspective that is morally wrong, the slaveowner fails to see the connection between himself and his slaves: “he is rather missing something about himself, or rather something about his connection with these people, his internal relation with them, so to speak.”³⁶ It’s not what he does see, that is, but what he *fails* to see that differentiates him from the person who is able to recognize the horrors of slavery; the slaveowner refuses to see his world with nuance, and fails to see the nuance in his world. Part of the problem for Cavell is that the *Weltanschauung* of the slaveowner prohibits him from seeing arguments against slavery. The problem is more aesthetic than it is rational, logical,

33. Cavell, *The Claim of Reason*, 378.

34. Cavell writes, “When he [the slaveowner] rapes a slave or takes her as a concubine, he does not feel that he has, by that fact itself, embraced sodomy. [...] He does not go to great lengths either to convert his horses to Christianity or to prevent their getting wind of it. Everything in his relation to his slaves shows that he treats them as more or less human—his humiliations of them, his disappointments, his jealousies, his fears, his punishments, his attachments” (CR 376).

35. *Ibid.*, 376.

36. *Ibid.*

or political: that is, the problem is not that I can't provide an adequate argument against slavery, it's that I can't get my interlocutor to see my argument as adequate. As Cavell puts it in *The Claim of Reason*, "I can *refuse to accept* a 'ground for doubt' without impugning it as false, and without supplying a new basis, and yet not automatically be dismissed as irrational or morally incompetent. What I *cannot* do, and yet maintain my position as morally competent, is to deny the relevance of your doubts."³⁷

Let me be clear: I'm not suggesting that making aesthetic judgments and owning slaves amount, in the end, to the same thing, and I certainly don't mean to imply that holding slaves amounts to little more than engaging with the world aesthetically. Rather, I'm attempting to draw out the parallels between Cavell's claims about aesthetic judgment and his claims about the *Weltanschauung* of the slaveowner, namely that each are motivated by the world of appearances. It's important, I think, to recognize that aesthetic sensibility underwrites Cavell's ideas about political belonging, inclusion, exclusion, and even abuse: not that holding slaves amounts to nothing more than making aesthetic judgments, but that sometimes our experience of the world of appearances, and the act of making aesthetic judgments, can amount to holding slaves, or can provide justification for adopting a worldview that would exclude, objectify, denigrate, and oppress others.

This is not to imply that every political judgment is some sort of coded aesthetic judgment, but rather to suggest that, insofar as the faculties at play in making aesthetic judgments are also responsible for certain political dispositions, the two overlap most explicitly in the act of interpretation. It's worth remembering that Cavell's discussion of seeing people as people (or failing to see the internal connections between people) begins with his suggestion that Wittgenstein's writings on seeing-as are really about interpretation. "Seeing something as something' is what Wittgenstein calls 'interpretation,'" Cavell writes, and adds that "imagination is called for, faced with the other, when I have to take the facts in, realize the significance of what is going on, make the behavior real for myself, make a connection."³⁸ The emphasis on interpretation becomes the introduction to Cavell's sense, which he inherits from

37. *Ibid.*, 267.

38. *Ibid.*, 354.

Wittgenstein, that our responses to and engagements with other people have more to do with aesthetics than they do with claims about knowledge, logic, or reason. “To know another mind,” Cavell writes, “is to interpret a physiognomy, and the message of this region of the *Investigations* is that this is not a matter of ‘mere knowing’.”³⁹ Cavell then invokes Wittgenstein’s surprising claim that “the human body is the best picture of the human soul.”⁴⁰ “Picture” ask us to adopt an aesthetic attitude toward others and underscores the pronounced shift away from the idea that *knowledge* is what mediates people; it’s not that I either know or don’t know another person, but that I respond (or don’t), acknowledge (or refuse to acknowledge), interpret (or fail to interpret) their being, their soul, that which makes them irrefutably human, that which provides us with an internal relation. Throughout pages 355-70 of *The Claim of Reason*, Cavell juxtaposes *knowledge* against other, more fitting modes of response to the human other, as he talks about knowledge as a form of experience (357), as expression (358), as attunement and intuition (359), as an attitude (360-61), and as an act of reading and interpretation (369-71). If human bodies are pictures of human souls, then the way to convince someone of the humanity of the other is not through reason and logic, but through aesthetic response: “in knowing others I am generally interpreting them.”⁴¹ In confronting the slaveowner—who, of course, in this example stands in for the *Weltanschauung* that would deny or question that justice supersedes the demands of history and tradition—we are left, in the end, with one argumentative claim: can’t you see?⁴²

Seeing something as something, interpreting a physiognomy, experiencing meaning, reading an expression—these are the sorts of things we do, Cavell writes, when we interact with others. And it is for these reasons that Cavell writes, pa-

39. *Ibid.*, 356.

40. In Wittgenstein, the line appears in *Philosophical Investigations*, §25; in Cavell, *The Claim of Reason*, 356. Cavell continues: “Not, I feel like adding, primarily because it represents the soul but because it expresses it. The body is the field of expression of the soul. The body is *of* the soul; it is the soul’s; a human soul *has* a human body.”

41. *Ibid.*, 371.

42. In her essay “‘We Feel Our Freedom’: Imagination and judgment in the thought of Hannah Arendt,” Linda Zerilli makes a comparable and important claim about the political value, even the necessity, of imagination: “Every extension of a political concept always involves an imaginative opening up of the world that allows us to see and articulate relations between things that have none (in any necessary, logical sense), to create relations that are external to their terms. Political relations are always external to their terms: they involve not so much the ability to subsume particulars under concepts, but an imaginative element, the ability to see or to forge new connections.” In *The Aesthetic Turn in Political Thought*, ed. Nikolas Kompridis (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), 57.

renthetically, “thus may the philosophy of mind become aesthetics.”⁴³ We experience our social lives and political lives through practices of aesthetic engagement, through activities like seeing and interpreting and expressing. And political life is indeed an *experience*, something we live more than something we know. Reconceiving our relations with others as aspects of our aesthetic sensibility shifts the focus from questions about what I can or cannot know about my world and others in it to questions about what, and how, I experience my world, what I see and feel and can communicate.

Aesthetic judgments in Cavell can be characterized by what Mulhall calls “the controlled deployment of subjectivity.”⁴⁴ Far from being the contemplative observation of a disinterested subject,⁴⁵ aesthetic engagement asks us to examine our responses to art objects and test our “capacity to understand ourselves in relation to these objects.”⁴⁶ Aesthetic engagement is not passive and reflexive, but active and introspective, prompting us to understand and responsibly articulate the world in which we live. Mulhall continues by suggesting that the critic “must rely upon a capacity of self-knowledge and a capacity to give expression to that self-knowledge in ways which will persuade people to try to share the subjective world of her aesthetic responses which is thereby displayed.”⁴⁷ This is a radical claim: the idea that we can *share* our subjective worlds underscores the extent to which expressions of aesthetic judgments are not solipsistic but communal, that in giving voice to our subjective experiences we can make known that which is ostensibly private. Aesthetic judgment invites partici-

43. *Ibid.*, 357.

44. Mulhall, *Stanley Cavell*, 28.

45. Forgive me for characterizing a common misreading of Kant’s view of aesthetic judgments. Those who believe that Kant views aesthetic judgment as a dispassionate reflection of detached observer might point to sentences like “judgments of taste, of themselves, do not even give rise to any interest” and “A judgment of taste [...] is merely *contemplative*, i.e., it is a judgment that is indifferent to the existence of the object” (*Critique of Judgment*, trans. Werner S. Pluhar [Indianapolis: Hackett, 1987] 48 n. 10, 51; emphasis original). The correct reading, however, would point out that the disinterest is directed not toward the judgment itself, but toward the object; if we take an interest in the object, our judgment in taste is no longer free. For Kant, our aesthetic judgments are derived not from the object, but from the presentation of the object. Kant writes that “what matters is what I do with this presentation within myself, and not the [respect] in which I depend on the object’s existence,” and also posits that “the presentation is referred only to the subject, namely, to his feeling of life, under the name feeling of pleasure or displeasure, and this forms the basis of a very special power of discriminating and judging” (46, 44; brackets original). Cavell’s sense that aesthetic judgment has significant impact on how we understand ourselves and our relation to our world is indebted to Kant’s suggestion that aesthetic judgment refers to, shows us, helps us to feel, not the object but the presentation of the object within our own minds.

46. Mulhall, *Stanley Cavell*, 28.

47. *Ibid.*, 28.

pation and risks rejection, and recognizing the expression of subjectivity as a claim to community helps to explain Cavell's frequent claim that the appeal to what "we" say does not ask to be, cannot be, confirmed or denied through empirical evidence.⁴⁸ "The philosopher appealing to everyday language," Cavell writes, "turns to the reader not to convince him without proof but to get him to prove something, test something, against himself. He is saying: Look and find out whether you can see what I see, wish to say what I wish to say."⁴⁹ The community that aesthetic judgment begets goes beyond personal agreement or disagreement and asks us to actively *participate* in each other's subjective experience of the world. I invite you not just to confirm or deny my perceptions, but to hear what I hear, taste what I taste, see what I see, and, if you can, to determine whether my words would also be your words.

One of the chief criticisms of Cavell as a political thinker is that, for all he says about the importance of shared human experience, he offers little specific instruction about how to define "community": who does it include and who, if anyone, should it exclude?⁵⁰ Cavell might say that these aren't the sorts of questions that philosophers need to be asking, proposing instead that the philosopher speak for herself and allow her interlocutors to determine whether the philosopher speaks for them too. Yet this is precisely the sort of response that has encouraged many to relegate Cavell to the figurative sidelines of political thought, since it seems to deflect the "ought" that is so important to the work of political philosophy. Ought we, for example, denounce racism, misogyny, homophobia in those around us? If our aim to speak for ourselves in an attempt to write the autobiography of a species, hoping that others will find themselves in our words, then we have failed to distinguish ourselves from the racist, who can claim the same measure of authority from this prescription—that is, while we're busy speaking for ourselves, so the racist will be busy speaking for himself, hoping meanwhile that others will find themselves in him. Put another way, to what *extent* do we speak for ourselves? To so great an extent that we refuse to engage, confront, denounce those who, in an effort to speak for *themselves* have committed some act

48. Cf. Cavell, *Must We Mean What We Say?*, 64, 95, 220. Compare Kant's suggestion that the "universal validity" of the judgment of taste "is not to be established by gathering votes and asking other people what kind of sensation they are having; but it must rest, as it were, on an autonomy of the subject who is making a judgment about the feeling of pleasure." Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, 144.

49. Cavell, *Must We Mean What We Say?*, 95-96.

50. These are some of the critiques that Joab Rosenburg makes in his review of Norris's *The Claim to Community in European Journal of Philosophy* 16.1 (2008): 153-56.

that “we” (those who don’t find ourselves in their words) recognize as morally dubious, or worse?

While there are (deliberately, on Cavell’s part) no formulaic answers to these questions, our way out of the problem begins by recognizing that Cavell’s claim to community is built implicitly upon the notion that we can speak only for ourselves, and that we cannot, *must* not, speak for others.⁵¹ While the racist may purport to be speaking for himself in the hopes that others will find themselves in his words—and even when others, inevitably, find themselves there—we should recognize the racist as, in fact, speaking for others, speaking for precisely those he would denounce. The racist, the misogynist, the homophobe are committed to a politics of renunciation: the racist speaks for some only insofar as he refuses, rejects, and renounces others. In response to Espin Hammer’s suggestion that he is a political romanticist, Cavell writes that “philosophy participates in two conversations essential to the formation of a reforming polity, namely the argument of the ordinary, which I say must never be won (since in retrieving words from their exiles—of fixity, encrustation, capture, illusory or empty purity—no one has a privileged authority), as well as the conversation of justice, which I say must never be lost (specifically by being closed in citing the rules of a current institution [...]).”⁵² We can recognize in this quote the slaveowner’s moral error: that he closes the conversation of justice by citing the rules of a current institution. Yet pointing out the slaveowner’s tautology—it’s okay to own slaves because the institution of slavery says it’s okay to own slaves—is unlikely to be persuasive. Even though we may remain unable to convince the slaveowner of his misguided morality, we might begin to recognize that his *Weltanschauung* is one in which he sees himself in a particular, and peculiar, relation to certain others; in interpreting others, the slaveowner has decided that he can, will, and even must speak for them, that his words will be the words of others. Following the practices of aesthetic interpretation that, I have been arguing, are fundamental to understanding our subjective experience of the world and mediate our interactions with others, we might point out

51. As Cavell puts it in *The Claim of Reason*, “The philosophical appeal to what we say, and the search for our criteria on the basis of which we say what we say, are claims to community. And the claim to community is always a search for the basis on which it can or has been established. [...] The wish and search for community are the wish and search for reason” (20).

52. Cavell, “The Inessence and the Absence of the Political,” in *The Claim to Community: Essays on Stanley Cavell and Political Philosophy*, ed. Andrew Norris (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006), 290.

that the slaveowner speaks for his slaves to the extent that “I am your master” implies its inverse, “you are my master.”

Aesthetics can help us here because aesthetic judgments in Cavell are implicitly democratic: they turn modes of knowing, which depend upon hierarchical divisions between subject and object, into modes of interpersonal engagement and expression.⁵³ The aesthetic judgment is an *invitation*, an attempt to offer up one’s own subjectivity in the hopes that other subjectivities will see themselves there.⁵⁴ As Cascardi has suggested, “Criticism works in part [...] as a way to disclose and to articulate, to test and to sustain, the contingency of the human that subtends the unity of experience.”⁵⁵ To suggest that aesthetic judgments are democratic is not to flatten or level them, not to suggest that all aesthetically motivated statements are equally valid. Quite the contrary, the democratic aspect of aesthetic judgment lies in the promise of disagreement, in the contested space that is revealed with the expression of subjectivity. But as Kant pointed out, the subjectivity we claim in our evaluations of works of art is not a solipsistic subjectivity but an interpersonal one: it is, as Cavell says of the passionate utterance, “an invitation to improvisation in the disorders of desire.”⁵⁶ Indeed, the value of aesthetic judgment lies in our ability to communicate; when we say “he really *knows* the text,” appropriating the language of epistemology, we mean that he is aware of its many nuances, can direct you to its subtleties, has worked through the text as a mode of expression and has come to an awareness of his own expressive response to the text; he can help you toward a deeper understanding of the text and a more complete engagement with it. What we mean when we say that someone “knows” a work of art is that he has interpreted it well, that he has experienced its meaning, that he has read it closely, that he has engaged with it fully.

I’ve been arguing here, after Cavell, that the refusal to see others aesthetically, to engage with the other through the rationale of aesthetic judgment and appreciati-

53. Cf. Cavell’s suggestion that this is one of the ways in which the emphasis of his criticism differs from some (but not all) academic criticism: “I think of this emphasis as letting a work of art have a voice in what philosophy says about it,” *Philosophy the Day After Tomorrow*, 10.

54. Consider Cavell’s related claim, early in *The Claim of Reason*, that “Since the granting of consent [that you speak for me] entails acknowledgement, the withdrawal of consent entail the same acknowledgement: I have to say *both* ‘It is not mine any longer’ (I am no longer responsible for it, it no longer speaks for me) *and* ‘It is no longer ours’ (not what we bargained for, we no longer recognize the principle of consent in it, the original ‘we’ is no longer bound together by consent but only by force, so it no longer exists)” (27).

55. Cascardi, “Cavell and Kant,” 57.

56. Cavell, *Philosophy the Day After Tomorrow*, 19.

on, is a refusal to recognize their humanity. Or, perhaps more accurately, that it is aesthetic sensibility that can bridge relations between people: not that I should see you as an aesthetic object, but that our relations with and towards other people should mirror those that we take towards aesthetic objects, that we seek to read them, understand them, engage with them fully and on their terms.⁵⁷ Cavell suggests of aesthetic judgments “that the familiar lack of conclusiveness in aesthetic argument, rather than showing up an irrationality, shows the kind of rationality it has, and needs.”⁵⁸ The same is true of political judgments: the slaveowner accepts his own tautological justification for slavery, bearing witness to the fact that rational argument cannot persuade him to abandon slavery. And yet this is not therefore evidence of the slaveowner’s irrationality or insanity. Recognizing that the slaveowner sees the world *this* way, and understands his place in it *thus*, we need an attentive understanding of how his world differs from ours, and a patient ability to put on display the nuance of our world; perhaps most importantly, we cannot lose sight of the fact that we may, after all this, fail to get him to see, and that our failure here is not therefore justification to stop trying. Early in *Philosophy the Day After Tomorrow*, Cavell explicitly labels Kant’s aesthetic judgment as a form of passionate utterance, before expanding: “One person, risking exposure to rebuff, singles out another, through the expression of an emotion and claim of value, to respond in kind, that is, with appropriate emotion and action (if mainly of speech), here and now.”⁵⁹ It’s in his emphasis on aesthetic judgment as exposure, as expressions of emotion and claims of value, that aesthetic judgment might come to inform or inflect political discourse; and it’s in his appeal to community, in the invitation or provocation or plain longing for a proper emotional response, that Cavell makes manifest the ways in which claims to aesthetic affection are necessarily communal and that aesthetics comes to mean little if it cannot be shared between people, or at the very least if it doesn’t prompt an expression that seeks to bridge subjectivities.

At the same time, Cavell is not interested in understanding art or artworks as modes of political resistance. If what I’ve been describing here is a sort of reversal of

57. As a converse to what I’ve been arguing here, we might think of Cavell’s suggestion in “Music Discomposed” that artworks matter to us in much the same way that people matter to us. See *Must We Mean What We Say?*, 197-98.

58. *Ibid.*, 86.

59. Cavell, *Philosophy the Day After Tomorrow*, 26.

Benjamin's notion of the aestheticization of politics—if I'm describing a politicization of aesthetics—then, insofar as this describes part of Cavell's aims, this has little to do with the political implications of engaging with art, or the political value of art criticism. Rather, Cavell is interested in understanding the ways in which political engagement draws upon modes of aesthetic understanding: not in arguing that aesthetics *should be* political, but in understanding the ways in which our interactions with others rely upon the same faculties of reason and experiences of emotion as our interactions with works of art. His appeals to community are political in the broadest sense, in that he sees in art the opportunity to come to deeper understanding about our place in the world and our relation to others in it. Engaging in a work of art and being able to identify—and defend—what you see there is a way of recognizing your own subjectivity and the subjectivity of another viewer. And yet critically, this recognition of subjectivity becomes, for Cavell, an invitation to express something about yourself and your world, and an invitation to get others to see what you see. For this is what the slaveowner misses about the slave: not that the slave is human, and not that the slave is capable of understanding, but that the slave is capable of improvising in the disorders of desire.