

# The Aesthetics of Politics and the Politics of Aesthetics In and After Cavell

EDITORIAL COMMENT

Politics seems bound up with questions of the ordinary and everyday as opposed to the extraordinary. This may be a Cavellian way of articulating the problem of political praxis, i.e., the point at which theory becomes action, but notice, at least in Cavell-speak, which way the trajectory flows. The Wittgensteinian charge to bring language back from holiday could be construed as a search for political or real-world praxis but not at the point where theory *becomes* action, but where theory is, in a sense, forgone or put on hiatus for the sake of action.

Yet how to prescribe such a hiatus or forgoing, say, theoretically? The banal charge to “simply do,” or to say, “this is simply what I do,” seems not much better. These essays wrestle with such issues. We have gathered them here, for the sake of coherence, under the thematic moniker of “politics,” as our call for papers explicitly solicited explorations of Cavell and the Aesthetization of Politics. The contributions, nonetheless, are broad and eclectic and address politics and praxis from a number of angles.

The first three explore the pedagogical take-aways of Stanley’s writings on education. Jeff Frank stresses the importance not of teaching students to remain inquisitive about subjects considered “foregone” (i.e., why is there inequality in the world?) but of teaching teachers to teach students to remain inquisitive—to have teachers face, in a sense, the crisis of skepticism bred not only by the existence of injustice in the world, but the hollowness of language. To Frank, “an educator welcomes the moment [of crisis] as an opportunity to grow: to make the school—and our society—more humane, more educative, more just.”

Derek Gottlieb further explores scenes of instruction, or, rather, *post*-scenes of instruction, i.e., the moment after spades are turned and bedrock is hit. If incom-

prehensibility follows, Gottlieb reminds us, something *has* happened, been revealed, even if the moment fails. That action must follow because we have reached the limits of language or the ineptness of intellection denies this knowledge. Political action begins with or from a sense of crisis, and this Cavellian revelation is not a bulwark or inhibitor to political action but a useful precursor—indicative, in other words, of Ranciere’s “active intervention” and *patager*.

Jon Najarian equally forcefully extends the idea that Cavell’s philosophy is not solely interested in ideas of aesthetics, eschewing politics; rather, Cavell seeks to do what Benjamin did from the other way around. Rather than politicizing aesthetics by articulating one’s politics first, Cavell seeks instead to understand the nature of aesthetic experiences and judgments as a basis for understanding how politics happens.

Rastislav Dinić, who is making headway as a scholar isolating Cavellian themes in the films of Dušan Makavejev, adds a socialist tint to Cavellian praxis; that such a tint exists in Cavell’s writings may indeed be apparent, if not readily or easily articulated. The same could be said of Heidegger, and the intersection of Cavell, Heidegger, and Cavell’s famous pupil protégé Terence Malick is touched upon in a brief excursus by Babak Geranfar.

We are also delighted to run an excerpt of Larry Jackson’s illuminating secondary treatment of Cavell’s oeuvre. The first of seven chapters follows here, along with a review essay of the entire work.

We wind down with some poetry by Larry Rhu, a dear friend of the journal whose eye and ear for language, Cavellian and otherwise, lucidly puts forward themes of American exceptionalism gone awry or spent, hence of philosophical promise wasted; dreams of a grandfather and a Heideggerian “thrownness”—into the autobody of a car or mind, or onto the American West—remain. Lastly, Richard Eldridge shares some of his meditations on the Cavellian valences of so-called “character criticism” in Shakespeare studies. To deny that Shakespeare’s characters can be read as actual human beings (via “impressionistic encounters”) necessitates forgoing a plenitude of significance latent in human speech. If we cannot exactly say that Shakespeare’s tragic characters are human beings, the dramatist’s chief power is to capture the breadth and scope of a form of life, not exactly biological, but in a way, organic.

A last(ing) note on Stanley Bates passing on December 10. In the saying of Victor Nuovo, his colleague at Middlebury College,

Stanley was a philosopher not only by profession, but in the whole of his being: his mind was open and tirelessly curious, never dogmatic, always careful in forming his opinions, always ready to revise them, and he was relentless in the search for truth.

About his work we can write the same as he wrote on Cavell's: his "works on [...] various-seeming topics possess a deep unity—one might say the unity of a life."<sup>1</sup> We find a deep agreement of principle between these philosophers in a well-known passage from Thoreau's *Walden*, an inspiration to both Stanleys: "There are nowadays professors of philosophy, but not philosophers. Yet it is admirable to profess because it was once admirable to live."<sup>2</sup> To live one's philosophy is something Bates embraced. Such sentiment still inspires readers and contributors in the conversations of this journal, a project Bates was enthusiastic about. He did not hesitate, for example, to accept our invitation to sit on our inaugural Advisory Board; *Conversations* continues to be guided by his spirit and generosity.

With all best wishes,

SÉRGIO AND AMIR

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1. Stanley Bates, "Stanley Cavell and Ethics," in *Stanley Cavell*, ed. Richard Eldridge (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 17.

2. Henry David Thoreau, *Walden*, ed. J. Lyndon Shanley (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1971), 14.